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Seneca and the Schools of Philosophy in Early Imperial Rome

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Seneca the Younger, as author of the philosophical *Epistles*, *Dialogues*, and the *De Clementia*, takes a place in treatments of the so-called "diatribe tradition"¹ which trace the path of this somewhat nebulous phenomenon from its origins in Bion.² In so much as Seneca's philosophical works are characteristically paraenetic—favoring ethical philosophy over the other types and couched in impassioned and persuasive language—they are no doubt rightfully included therein.³ However, as scholars have pointed out, it is doubtful whether Seneca had first-hand knowledge of the fourth-century diatribists.⁴ Such knowledge as he had of them could rather have been derived from the *florilegia* of their sayings which were in common circulation,⁵ or through the philosophers of the Old and Middle Stoa.⁶ I

¹ E.g., R. Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 13 (Göttingen 1910) 7; H. Weber, *De Senecae philosophi dicendi genere Bioneo* (diss. Marburg 1895); A. Oltramare, *Les origines de la diatribe romaine* (Lausanne 1926) 252 ff.

² Diatribe is defined by M. T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford 1976) 13, as "a popular philosophical discourse invented by Bion the Borysthenite, devoted usually to a single moral theme and aimed at a wider circle than school philosophy, being loose in structure and characterized by a pointed style, vivid imagery, and colloquialisms." The problems associated with the concept of "diatribe" as used by modern scholars are discussed by H. D. Jocelyn, "Diatribes and Sermons," *LCM* 7 (1982) 3-7.

³ Cf. e.g., Oltramare (above, note 1) 13, on diatribe: "Le lecteur est sans cesse harcelé par un maître qui semble avoir pris à tâche de le persuader immédiatement et lui parle le langage le plus propre à le séduire."

⁴ Griffin (above, note 2) 14 n. 3, takes a very conclusive stance on this: "Seneca can certainly not be said to have been influenced directly by Bion or Teles." J. F. Kindstrand, *Bion of Borysthenes: A Collection of the Fragments with Introduction and Commentary*, *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* 11 (Uppsala 1976) 86 f., concludes more tentatively that "both Plutarch and Seneca had some knowledge of the actual work of Bion and that they were not drawing exclusively on a collection of extracts. This is made even more plausible by the fact that they were both widely read."

⁵ Seneca himself complains bitterly about adults whose sole claim to the title of philosopher resides in *sententiae* and *chreiai* memorized at school (*Ep.* 33. 7 f.). Diogenes the Cynic often served as a source of *apophthegmata* for school use; cf. S. F. Bonner, *Education in ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley 1977)

would suggest, however, that for the *immediate* source of the defining characteristics of Seneca's philosophical style and interests, we need look no further than Seneca's immediate surroundings. That is to say, the qualities of his work which attract definition as "diatribe" can be attributed more directly to the influences of contemporary philosophers at Rome.

Seneca regarded himself as a Stoic, of course, receiving instruction in his youth in that philosophy from Attalus, whose teaching he enthusiastically describes.⁷ Another teacher of his early years was Papirius Fabianus. Seneca likely heard Fabianus in his capacity as a declaimer as well as instructor in philosophy, for his involvement with the rhetorical schools and parts of his declamations have been recorded by Seneca's father, Seneca the Elder.⁸ As a philosopher, Fabianus regarded himself as a member of the so-called "Sextian" school of philosophy,⁹ founded by Sextius a generation earlier. Seneca, however, for good reason, as I shall show, saw little to distinguish the Sextians from the Stoics.¹⁰ Seneca also attended the lectures of another Sextian, Sotion, who was influential in Seneca's life, but about whom we know relatively little.¹¹ Finally, Seneca was also to come into contact with Cynic philosophy in the person of Demetrius, and although this meeting occurred later in life, when Seneca was no longer an impressionable youth, he writes of Demetrius' teachings with as much enthusiasm as he shows for those of the Stoic Attalus and the Sextian Fabianus.¹²

From allusions in Seneca's prose-works to the teaching of Attalus, Sextius, Fabianus, Sotion, and Demetrius we are able to form a picture of these three philosophical schools—Stoic, Sextian, and Cynic—as they were in early Imperial Rome. What emerges, I believe, is this: that the teaching

173 ff. and G. von Wartensleben, *Begriff der griechischen Chreia und Beiträge zur Geschichte ihrer Form* (Heidelberg 1901) 28 ff.

⁶ Ariston of Chios, described by O. Hense, "Ariston bei Plutarch," *RhM* (1890) 541, as "kynisch gefarbter Stoiker," appears to have been a Stoic source of Cynic imagery for Seneca; cf. my Ph.D. thesis, *The Imagery of Morality in Seneca's Prose-Works* (McMaster University 1985) 224 f. and n. 15, p. 230.

⁷ *Ep.* 108. 3 ff.

⁸ Cf. *Contr.* 2 praef. 1-5; 2. 1. 10-13, 25-26, 28; 2. 2. 4; 2. 3. 5, 9, 12; 2. 4. 3, 7, 10-11; 2. 5. 6-7, 18-19; 2. 6. 2, 4; *Suas.* 1. 4, 9-10.

⁹ Seneca the Elder, *Contr.* 2 praef. 4; Suetonius, *Gram.* 18; Quintilian 10. 1. 124.

¹⁰ *Ep.* 64. 2: "Lectus est deinde liber Quinti Sextii patris, magni, si quid mihi credis, viri, et licet neget Stoici."

¹¹ There are several philosophers known by the name of Sotion; cf. *Der kleine Pauly*, s.v. Oltramare (above, note 1) 166 contests the usual view (e.g. E. Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. S. F. Alleyne and E. Abbott [New York 1886] 286; M. Pohlenz, *Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*⁴ [Göttingen 1970] 280; Griffin [above, note 2] 37) that this Sotion was a follower of Sextius.

¹² Cf. Oltramare (above, note 1) 232 n. 2: "son influence ne se manifeste que sur les écrits de Sénèque postérieurs à la retraite politique du philosophe." For the dating of Demetrius, cf. M. Billerbeck, *Der Kyniker Demetrius: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der frühkaiserzeitlichen populärphilosophie*, *Philosophia antiqua* 36 (Leiden 1979) 10.

style and concerns of these three schools were strikingly similar, in so far as they shared the elements of paraenesis, which, as I have said, typify Seneca's own philosophical prose-works. Chief among these elements is a predominating concern with ethical, rather than speculative, philosophy, presented in an eloquent and persuasive style. Cerebral speculation gives way to the voice of certainty in a direct exhortation to the soul, rendered vivid and meaningful to the audience by images or analogies¹³ drawn from everyday experience. In short, the elements of paraenesis are threefold: ethics, eloquence, and illustrative imagery.

In many passages of the prose-works, Seneca makes clear his contempt for the kind of philosophizing in which semantic casuistry takes precedence over a compelling presentation of the moral issues which face mankind.¹⁴ Such an order of priorities, he feels, is comparable to stopping to look over a game of chess when one's house is burning down or lingering to peruse notices of edicts and games on the way to summon a midwife for one's daughter (*Ep.* 117. 30):

Transcurramus sollertissimas nugas et ad illa quae nobis aliquam opem sunt latura properemus. nemo qui obstetricem parturienti filiae sollicitus accersit edictum et ludorum ordinem perlegit; nemo qui ad incendium domus suae currit tabulam latrunculariam prospicit ut sciat quomodo alligatus exeat calculus.

In contrast to Seneca's criticism of those who indulge in such *cavillationes*¹⁵ is his enthusiastic endorsement of the approach of his own teachers. Fabianus, for example, he tells us, used to say "contra adfectus impetu, non subtilitate pugnandum, nec minutis vulneribus sed incursu avertendam aciem; [non probat cavillationes] <vitia> enim contundi debere,

¹³ Henceforth I use the terms "image" and "imagery" to include all types of technically distinct figurative language, e.g., metaphor, simile, analogy.

¹⁴ E.g., *Ep.* 45. 4 ff., 48. 4 ff., 49. 5 ff., 71. 6, 82. 8 ff., 83. 8 ff., 85. 1 ff., 88. 42 ff., 102. 20, 108. 12, 109. 17 f., 111, 113, 117. 25 ff.

¹⁵ Among the ranks of those who indulge in such *cavillationes* Seneca places Stoics of the Old and Middle Stoa: Zeno (*Ep.* 82. 9 ff., 83. 9 ff.), Chrysippus (*Ben.* 1. 3. 8 ff.), Posidonius (*Ep.* 83. 10 ff., 87. 31 ff.) and Antipater (*Ep.* 87. 38 ff.). He also reproaches with this fault Peripatetics (*Ep.* 87. 38), Academics, Xenocrates and Speusippus (*Ep.* 85. 18), and Epicurus (*ibid.*). Seneca refers more than once to the "hairsplitting" style as a characteristic of Greek philosophers: *Ep.* 82. 8 ("ineptias Graecas"), *Ben.* 1. 3. 6 ("Sit aliquis usque eo Graecis emancipatus"). By "Greek" he cannot mean ethnicity alone, as Attalus, the Greek teacher whom Seneca so much admired, had a style far removed from the casuistical one Seneca despises, as had most Stoics who followed in the footsteps of Panaetius (Cicero tells us that "... tristitiam atque asperitatem fugiens Panaetius nec acerbiter sententiarum nec disserendi spinas probavit..." *Fin.* 4. 28. 79). Insofar as Seneca has Stoics in mind in his criticism of the dialectical approach to philosophy, he probably alludes to members of the Old Stoa who had no connection with Rome, and whose style was quite different from that of the "Roman" Stoics. Criticism of philosophers for splitting hairs is, of course, a topos in itself: cf. the σκινδαλαμοί of Aristophanes (*Nub.* 130, *Ran.* 819).

non vellicari" (*Brev. Vit.* 10. 1). It is the absence of this aggressively proreptic approach to ethics, reflected in Fabianus' physical and military vocabulary, which Seneca criticizes in Chrysippus, picking up *ex contrario* similar physical imagery when he describes him as "magnum mehercules virum, sed tamen Graecum, cuius acumen nimis tenue retunditur et in se saepe replicatur; etiam cum agere aliquid videtur, pungit, non perforat" (*Ben.* 1. 4. 1).

The common concern of Seneca's teachers¹⁶ for the ethical problems facing mankind, and the similarity of the solutions they proposed, is illustrated by the sermons on the evil of luxury which Seneca attributes to each of Sextius (*Ep.* 108. 18), Attalus (*Ep.* 110. 14 ff.), and Demetrius (*Ben.* 7. 9. 1 ff.),¹⁷ while we have the testimony of Seneca the Elder for speeches on the topic given by Fabianus (*Contr.* 2. 1. 11 ff., 25; 2. 5. 7). Sextius, Seneca tells us (*Ep.* 108. 17), put his condemnation of luxury into practice by restricting himself to a frugal vegetarian diet; vegetarianism was also preached by Sotion, his follower, with the result that Seneca gave up eating meat for a year (*Ep.* 108. 22), while, owing to the influence of Attalus, Seneca ate no oysters or mushrooms and drank no wine (*Ep.* 108. 15 f.).¹⁸ The sermons of Attalus and Demetrius on the evil of luxury—which are presented by Seneca at considerable length—contain the topoi of criticism of luxury typical of the moralizing tradition.¹⁹ It is, perhaps, not surprising then, that we also find Fabianus in a speech remembered by Seneca the Elder, delivering the same topoi in the schools of declamation; this speech is, in turn, closely echoed by our Seneca in his prose-works.²⁰ Cross-fertilization between the schools of rhetoric and philosophy at this period is clearly a major factor in the explanation of the homogeneity of the philosophical schools at this time.²¹

¹⁶ Sextius, of course, was not directly Seneca's teacher, but, indirectly, as teacher of his teachers Fabianus and Sotion; cf. above, p. 50.

¹⁷ Billerbeck's ([above, note 12] 19) comment on the speech placed in the mouth of Demetrius (*Ben.* 7. 9. 1 ff.) is well taken, and to some extent, should, perhaps, be considered in relation to all direct speech placed by Seneca in the mouth of others: "Diese von Seneca offensichtlich als ethopoeitische Oratio verfaßte Invektive wirft natürlich wiederum die grundsätzliche Frage auf, inwieweit die unter dem Namen des Demetrius aufgenommenen Ausführungen und Aussprüche authentisch sind."

¹⁸ Seneca does not explicitly describe the Cynic Demetrius as a vegetarian, although avoidance of meat is typically advocated by the Cynics; cf. Oltramare (above, note 1) 50, theme 31d, also A. C. van Geytenbeek, *Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe*, trans. B. L. Hijmans, Jr. (Assen 1962) 96 ff.

¹⁹ Cf. Oltramare (above, note 1) themes 35, 35c, 37, 38, 39a, 40 and van Geytenbeek (previous note) 111 ff.

²⁰ Cf. E. Rolland, *De l'influence de Sénèque le père et des rhéteurs sur Sénèque le philosophe* (Ghent 1906) 40 ff., for list of parallels.

²¹ Note how Seneca the Elder recommends to his son the example of Fabianus, who continued to study rhetoric along with philosophy: *Contr.* 2 praef. 4, and Tacitus, *Dial.* 19. The long-standing connection between the moralists and the schools of rhetoric was especially strengthened, according to Oltramare (above, note 1) 153 ff., by Sextius.

A dialectical approach to philosophy, which, as we have seen,²² Seneca reproaches in Old Stoics and others, is necessarily couched in a dispassionate and uninspiring style. By contrast, it is incumbent on philosophers like Seneca, who regard themselves as "teachers of mankind,"²³ to present their message in as persuasive a manner as possible. The persuasive power of Attalus' eloquence is mentioned by Seneca in relation to his exhortation to ascetism, with what results I have already mentioned (*Ep.* 108. 14):

Cum vero commendare paupertatem coeperat et ostendere quam quidquid usum excederet pondus esset supervacuum et grave ferenti, saepe exire e schola pauperi libuit. cum coeperat voluptates nostras traducere, laudare castum corpus, sobriam mensam, puram mentem non tantum ab illicitis voluptatibus sed etiam supervacuis, libebat circumscribere gulam ac ventrem.

The son's testimony is supported by the father's. Seneca the Elder describes Attalus as "magnae vir eloquentiae, ex his philosophis quos vestra aetas vidit longe et subtilissimus et facundissimus" (*Suas.* 2. 12). Seneca praises, in terms similar to those he uses for Attalus, the ability of Sextius and his follower Fabianus, to inspire the neophyte with a spirit of emulation, while, at the same time, not inducing in him despair of success. After a recent reading of a philosophical work of Sextius, Seneca comments (*Ep.* 64. 3 f.):

Quantus in illo, di boni, vigor est, quantum animi! hoc non in omnibus philosophis invenies: quorundam scripta clarum habentium nomen exanguia sunt. instituunt, disputant, cavillantur, non faciunt animum quia non habent: cum legeris Sextium, dices, "vivit, viget, liber est, supra hominem est, dimittit me plenum ingentis fiduciae." in qua positione mentis sim cum hunc lego fatebor tibi: libet omnis casus provocare, libet exclamare, "quid cessas, fortuna? congregere: paratum vides." illius animum induo qui quaerit ubi se experiatur, ubi virtutem suam ostendat . . .

Similarly, with reference to the eloquence of Fabianus, Seneca says "cum audirem certe illum, talia mihi videbantur, non solida sed plena, quae adulescentem indolis bonae attollerent et ad imitationem sui evocarent *sine desperatione vincendi*, quae mihi adhortatio videtur efficacissima" (*Ep.* 100. 12).²⁴ The same spirit or *animus* and the same disregard for semantic niceties which make the Sextian style so effectively persuasive, also, Seneca tells us, characterized Demetrius' style. Seneca describes him as a man "exactae, licet neget ipse, sapientiae firmaeque in iis, quae proposuit, constantiae, eloquentiae vero eius, quae res fortissimas deceat, non

²² See above, p. 51 and n. 15.

²³ *Ep.* 89. 13: "... tamquam quidquam aliud sit sapiens quam generis humani paedagogus."

²⁴ On Fabianus' eloquence, cf. also *Ep.* 40. 12.

concinatae nec in verba sollicitae, sed ingenti animo, prout impetus tulit, res suas prosequentis"²⁵ (*Ben.* 7. 8. 2).

An important aspect of the effectively persuasive style, Seneca tells us at *Ep.* 59. 6, is the image (*imagines*). Those whose prime concern is to persuade, use them "ut et dicentem et audientem in rem praesentem adducant" (*ibid.*). A particularly masterly exploitation of the image in philosophical writing, Seneca tells us, is to be found in Sextius. He cites Sextius' comparison of the wise man's preparation for adversity to a general's readiness for attack while on the march (*Ep.* 59. 7).

Elsewhere in the prose-works, references made by Seneca to images used by Attalus, Fabianus, and Demetrius show us that Sextius' follower, as well as the Stoic and Cynic, were equally aware of the persuasive power of the image in paraenesis.²⁶ Furthermore, it emerges from these references that Attalus, Fabianus, and probably Demetrius too, used, like Sextius, imagery drawn from the sphere of war. I have referred already to Fabianus' use of the image of a military onslaught on the emotions at *Brev. Vit.* 10. 1.²⁷ At *Ep.* 67. 15 Seneca quotes Attalus as saying:

malo me fortuna in castris suis quam in delicis habeat. torqueor, sed fortiter: bene est. occidior, sed fortiter: bene est.

At *Prov.* 3. 3 Seneca illustrates an axiom of Demetrius—"mihi videtur infelicius eo cui nihil umquam eventit adversi"—with the image of a battle with Fortuna:

Non licuit enim illi se experiri. ut ex voto illi fluxerint omnia, ut ante votum, male tamen de illo di iudicaverunt: indignus visus est a quo vinceretur aliquando fortuna, quae ignavissimum quemque refugit, quasi dicat: "quid ergo? istum mihi adversarium adsumam? statim arma summittet; non opus est in illum tota potentia mea, levi comminatione pelletur, non potest sustinere vultum meum. alius circumspiciatur cum quo conferre possimus manum: pudet congregi cum homine vinci parato."

That Demetrius himself used such an image to illustrate the axiom Seneca attributes to him seems highly likely.²⁸

²⁵ The opposition which Seneca makes here between *res* and *verba* is a constant theme, implicit or explicit, in his opposition of ethical to dialectical philosophy; cf. *Ep.* 52. 8, 75. 7, 83. 27, 87. 40, 88. 32, 108. 6, 38 (*non est loquendum sed gubernandum*), 117. 33.

²⁶ In addition to those that follow, cf. *Ep.* 9. 7, 63. 5 f., 72. 8, 81. 22 (Attalus); *Ep.* 69. 17, 91. 19, *Ben.* 7. 1. 4 (Demetrius); *Ep.* 73. 15 (Sextius).

²⁷ See above, pp. 51-52.

²⁸ A similar military scenario, in which a soldier is addressed by 'Ανδρεία and Δειλία, is attributed by Stobaeus (3. 8. 20) to a Demetrius, whom P. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur in ihren Beziehungen zu Judentum und Christentum*² (Tübingen 1912) 85 n. 1, in agreement with O. Hense, *RE s.v.* "Ioannes Stobaios," IX (1916) 2582 f., attributes to Demetrius the Cynic, Seneca's contemporary. For more recent discussion, cf. Billerbeck (above, note 12) 57 ff.

"Les comparaisons de la vie avec la guerre sont les plus fréquentes de la diatribe," says Oltramare,²⁹ and certainly they represent one of the largest groups of imagery in Seneca's philosophical works, rivalled only by medical images in number.³⁰ Of course the militaristic nature of Roman society meant that military imagery was part of the general currency of the language; and among philosophers its use is certainly not confined to "diatribists"—we find it, for example, in the mouth of Plato's Socrates.³¹ The fact, then, that we find this image being used by Seneca's teachers and contemporaries among the Stoic, Sextian, and Cynic schools of philosophy in first-century Rome is not so much significant in itself, but is rather one more piece of evidence which, taken with others, confirms that there were many similarities between their teaching styles and orientations.

An overriding concern with ethics, couched in a persuasive style and illustrated by imagery, was, then, common to the Stoic, Sextian, and Cynic schools with which Seneca came into contact in Rome. That Seneca's own philosophical works mirror these characteristics needs little demonstration. The points of speculative philosophy that he treats are few, and then almost always in a tone of deprecation.³² The entire thrust of his message is an insistently ethical one, as Seneca conceives of himself as a guide to lost travellers (*Ep.* 8. 3), a doctor (*Cons. Marc.* 1. 8; *Cons. Helv.* 1. 2, 2. 1 f.), or, more modestly, as a fellow-patient passing on the remedies learnt during convalescence (*Ep.* 27. 7). "Volo luxuriam obiurgari, libidinem traduci, inpotentiam frangi," Seneca tells us in a characterization, attributed to Lucilius, of the ideal philosophical homily (*Ep.* 100. 10). Such a program is rigorously pursued by Seneca. To convey his message as persuasively as possible he notoriously spares neither words nor rhetorical devices. Figuring prominently among the latter are very many images of the kind that, as we have seen, he had heard and admired in the Stoic, Sextian, and Cynic schools of Rome.³³ In particular, like Sextius, Fabianus, Attalus, and Demetrius, Seneca often uses military imagery characterizing the Stoic sage as a soldier of God, and the morally flawed as those who fight timidly or turn in flight.³⁴

Fourth-century Cynic philosophers such as Bion, as preachers for the "man in the street," undoubtedly concerned themselves with ethical

²⁹ Oltramare (above, note 1) 56. Cf. also O. Halbauer, *De diatribis Epicteti* (diss. Leipzig 1911) 32 and n. 1 and R. Bultmann (above, note 1) 36.

³⁰ Cf. my thesis (above, note 6) 176 ff., 194 ff.

³¹ Cf. H. Emonds, "Geistlicher Kriegsdienst: der Topos der militia spiritualis in der antiken Philosophie," in *Heilige Überlieferung. Ausschnitte aus der Geschichte des Mönchtums und des heiligen Kultes*, ed. O. Casel (Münster 1938) 25.

³² In *Ep.* 65, e.g., which discusses the "first cause," Seneca preempts criticism from Lucilius with: "Quid te" inquis "delectat tempus inter ista contere, quae tibi nullum adfectum eripiunt, nullam cupiditatem abigunt?" (65. 15). Cf. note 14.

³³ For a full treatment of the images used by Seneca, cf. my thesis (above, note 6).

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, s.v. M. 1, pp. 194 ff., and M. 2, pp. 198 ff.

exhortation, which they rendered more comprehensible to the crowd by means of images drawn from everyday life. Certain of these, as well as certain stock themes, are shared by generations of moralizing literature including that of Seneca and his philosophical contemporaries.³⁵ In this sense it is meaningful to place much of Seneca's extant prose in a "diatribe" tradition. An immediate explanation, however, of the paraenetic characteristics of Seneca's philosophical prose-works lies close at hand in the schools of philosophy—Stoic, Sextian, and Cynic—that Seneca attended at Rome. In each and all of these he could have heard ethical exhortation couched in impassioned and oratorical language, illustrated by images drawn from a common stock.

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³⁵ For themes, cf. Oltramare (above, note 1) 263 ff. For images, cf. my thesis (above, note 6) passim.