

Digesting Impressions: The Speeches of Attalus and Sotion in Seneca's 108th *Epistle*

Scholars commonly regard Seneca's 108th *Epistle* as a crucial piece of evidence for his biography (e.g. Griffin 1976, Inwood 2005, Sellars 2014). The letter details Seneca's education under his teachers Attalus, Sotion, and Sextius, about whom little information survives. Few scholars have considered the possibility, however, that Seneca's representation of his teachers might say more about his own didactic aims within the letter rather than his actual life's story. Through close readings of Attalus and Sotion's speeches, which situate them within the *Epistle* as a whole, this paper argues that Seneca largely erases the distinction between his authorial *persona* and those whose voices he imitates in accordance with a broadly Stoic worldview. Seneca calls into question the distinction between himself and his teachers in ways that suggest their mutual harmony with reason based on shared impressions.

Seneca begins the letter by encouraging Lucilius to moderate his intake of philosophy. He explains that he should only take in as much material as he is able to receive and break complex problems into smaller parts (*Ep.* 108.2). Upon concluding this advice, Seneca notes that it was actually Attalus who said these things to Seneca himself (*Ep.* 108.3). Seneca then gives a speech of indeterminate length in Attalus's voice marked by a high degree of parallelism, in which he explains that the goal of student and teacher ought to be the same. Although Reynolds only puts the first sentence in quotation marks in his *OCT*, there is no clear marker in the Latin where Attalus's voice ends and Seneca's authorial voice resumes. In blending his words with his teacher's, Seneca evokes their shared harmony with universal *logos*, the goal of the very Stoic education that Attalus discusses.

Later in the letter, Seneca assumes the voice of Sotion and gives a speech in favor of vegetarianism (*Ep.* 108.20-21). Sotion echoes (“*Non credis... animas in alia corpora*”) the

words of Pythagoras, recounted by Seneca in indirect discourse a little earlier in the letter (*Nulla, si illi credas, anima interit... dum in aliud corpus transfunditur*, Ep. 108.19). Seneca himself inverts Pythagoras's description of transmigration (*animorum commercium in alias atque alias formas transeuntium*, Ep. 108.19) when describing how the impression of the teacher ought to remain within the soul of the student (*animo forma permaneat*, Ep. 108.7). The liquid connotation of *transfunditur* might remind the reader of Seneca (or Attalus's) earlier exhortation to Lucilius to take in (*hauriendum est*, Ep. 108.2) only as much material as he is able. Sotion's description of the transmigration of souls can be read as a metacommentary on Seneca's appropriation of his voice within his text; it could also be read as a coded description of the impressions he and Attalus made on Seneca's soul. Sotion's allusions to exchanges (*per vices*) and circles (*per orbem*) evoke the transference of knowledge between Pythagoras, Sotion, Seneca, and Lucilius as well as the reciprocity of the opening of the letter, with its cyclic transmissions between Attalus, Seneca, and Lucilius. Seneca draws us into this transmission of impressions as we read the text. The literary design of the speech models how the mind should receive impressions, whether their source is Attalus, Sotion, or Seneca's text. Although the speeches can be read biographically, their literary design suggests that historical accuracy may not be Seneca's top priority.

Bibliography

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