

Writing to Realization: Seneca's 30th *Epistle*

Seneca's 30th *Epistle* contains a striking inconsistency. Seneca devotes most of the letter to describing the authority of the historian Aufidius Bassus's pronouncements regarding death based on the imminence of his own demise. However, near the letter's end, Seneca reverses this position, claiming that we are all equally close to death, with the implication that anyone possesses an authority comparable to that of the old historian. Although scholars have recognized that the letter occupies a pivotal position within the collection as a whole (e.g. Maurach 1970, Hachmann 1995), few have hazarded an interpretation that makes sense of the letter's unexpected turn. This presentation argues that the letter represents the progression of the thought of its author under the influence of his own rhetoric. The literary elements of the letter, specifically its disordered chronology and Seneca's monologues in Bassus's voice, not only capture Seneca's mind at work, but also influence the nature of his ultimate conclusion at the letter's end, namely that death is equally close to us all.

Seneca, like other Stoics, held that the entire cycle of fate recurs endlessly in a timeless present (e.g. Viparelli 2000). The effects of this temporality are traceable in Seneca's description of his encounter with Bassus. Seneca begins by describing a particular visit using the perfect tense (*vidi, Ep. 30.1*). However, he later uses the present tense when introducing his direct speech (*loquitur, Ep. 30.5*), only to revert to the imperfect later in the letter (*Dicebat, Ep. 30.14*) and subsequently back to the present (*audio, Ep. 30.15*). Bassus likewise mixes present and future together in his rehearsal for his funeral (*videbatur mihi prosequi se et componere, Ep. 30.5*); the literary connotations of *componere* might evoke Seneca's composition of the letter, perhaps a rehearsal for his own death with Bassus as his surrogate. In contrast with a tidy, linear, chronological account, the mix of tenses and aspects suggests that there are two or more

moments occurring simultaneously. If the entire cycle of fate recurs in the present, then death can be no further or closer to anyone, a conclusion reached near the end of the letter.

This condensation of time can also be observed in Seneca's speeches in Bassus's voice. Reynolds' *OCT*, the Loeb translation by Gummere (1917), and the recent translation by Graver and Long (2015) all feature differing placement of quotation marks throughout the letter. Near the conclusion, he introduces Bassus as speaker again with the word *inquit* (*Ep.* 30.16) though it is impossible to determine where his voice ends and Seneca's voice resumes. Although Seneca spends most of the letter extolling Bassus's authoritative pronouncements about death based on the imminence of his demise, in this final speech, Seneca/Bassus claims that we are always the same distance from death (*Ab ipsa enim semper tantundem absumus*) and that no time is free from death (*Quod enim morti tempus exemptum est?*, *Ep.* 30.17). The blurring of voices leads to the erasure of distinctions of time and identity as Bassus's words turn out to be Seneca's or possibly the readers, especially if they read them aloud, as ancient Romans commonly did (see Valette-Cagnac 1997). The lively rhetoric of the writing both captures and influences a mind at work, drawing the reader towards a realization of death's imminence.

Bibliography

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