



The work within the work
Reading the ninth book of Seneca's *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* as a whole

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Abstract

The following research project wonders about the possibility of reading the ninth book of the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* as a work within the work, both an autonomous unity and in dialogue with the other Senecan books, with Latin sources (Catullus, Cicero, Vergil, etc.) and Greek sources (Aristotle, Epicureanism, Stoicism, etc.), full of internal lexical and conceptual references, which somehow summarize the main precepts of Senecan philosophy: wisdom which must benefit (*prodesse*), contempt for death and knowing how to die as freedom, necessity of coherence between words and deeds, *honestum* as *unicum bonum*, necessity of living according to nature and progressing on the path to virtue, life as drama (*ep. 80, 7: hic humanae vitae mimus*). Consistently with these objectives, we aim at offering a general introduction to the ninth book, specific introductions to the single epistles, a new translation of the book and a thematical, lexical, intertextual and stylistic commentary of it. Furthermore, we report the centrality in the contemporary debate of the themes detectable from the chosen book, particularly relating to the binomial truth/fiction of the self and of the self in relation with others, the need to seek a social utility of knowledge and the knowing how to die as expression of freedom: an urgent theme, topic especially of the epistles 77 and 78, which can offer food for thought about the big contemporary issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Project description

As shown by Berno 2006 (p. 16), a substantial part of Senecan letters still needs a commentary: particularly, the scholar elaborates a commentary on the block 53-57 of the sixth book's letters, conceived as a narrative-thematic nucleus, through a detailed analysis of each letter and an organic analysis of the entire group, the study of intertextuality, external and internal, of philosophical themes and style. Berno, however, doesn't build a commentary on the entire sixth book, omitting the letters from 58 to 62, because of the conviction that the possibility of a unitary commentary is



open to nuclei of variable dimension, not coincident with the book unit. Cancik 1967 has a different perspective: he would try to detect, in the same book and in other books of the epistolary, elements unifying groups of the letters which compose them, in addition to the intentional intertextuality between them; it's interesting and worthy of further study, in particular, what he cursorily states about the ninth book, in which he identifies, among the possible thematic nuclei which connect the letters together, underlying relations with the eighth book, the reflection on the inner attitude which one should have towards life and death and on the relationship between *proficientes* and *sapientes* (pp. 149-150). Also Maurach 1970 shares, with Cancik, the chance to adopt unitarian criteria of interpretation on the level of the corpus of the *Epistulae* and of the single books, among which the ninth book too. On this theme the bibliography appears traditionally divided, preferring mostly focusing on the thematic analysis of single epistles (Scarpat 2007), or groups of some epistles identified generally according to mainly thematic criteria (Edwards 2019). Nevertheless, very recent studies on the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* opened innovative exegetical opportunities, through the proposal of commentaries to single books, until now rare, excepting the first book, commented at first by Scarpat 1975 and then by Richardson-Hay 2006 as a whole with a unitarian and interrelated structure which progressively develops Senecan arguments, the third book (Laudizi 2003) and the sixth (Berno 2006, with the already shown limits), intended as structurally coherent and cohesive units: great interest has been aroused, in this sense, by Soldo's commentary to the second book of the *Epistulae* (Soldo 2021), which recovers and re-elaborates the methodological intuition of Richardson Hay 2006, refounding this original tendency, fruitful of results. Soldo seems convinced of the necessity of reading and interpreting the epistles following the sequence predisposed by Seneca and in the reciprocal relationships within the book, approach which would permit to fully reveal its meanings. Aside from the enthusiasm, which might perhaps appear excessive, I agree with Trinacty 2023, who, reviewing the commentary of Soldo 2021, underlines its effective capability to renew and considerably enrich our knowledge of Seneca's second book and, more generally, of his thought and of the care with which he elaborated his work, revealing previously hidden details and, most of all, introducing a convincing analytical method which, as Trinacty himself claims, would deserve to be applied to the other books of *Epistulae* too, in order to fill a gap in the bibliography and inaugurate original lines of research.

In the wake of this promising trend in the literature, the present research aims at elaborating a commentary on a particularly dense book, subject of very recent studies, especially on the epistle 77 (Venarucci 2022, id. 2023), the ninth book, of which we hypothesize a unitary and organic structure. This structure would be marked by some themes' recurrence in the letters which compose it, such as the relationship between form, theatre and life, the *sapientia* aimed at *prodesse*, the contempt for *simulatio* and *fictio*, the necessity to pursue the *honestum*, only good, by living following *natura*, the contempt for death as remedy to every evil and human being's *servitus*. Furthermore, these themes



would look to be developed through an intentional and rational path which goes that crosses the entire book, the sense of which would be fully revealed reading the epistles as concatenated conceptual steps of a unitary and organic philosophical system, rather than a fragmentary one. The ninth book, indeed, offers precepts which teach, substantially, how to live and die, which is, in Senecan philosophy, an additional and maybe the most important proof of knowing how to live: in this sense the central position occupied by the epistle 77, in which the theme of Marcellino's death is widely discussed, would be explained. Seneca himself justifies the length of his *fabella* stating its *utilitas*, since the acceptance of death's necessity often requires *exempla* such as that of Marcellinus' voluntary death (*ep.* 77, 10), in front of a long and annoying incurable disease. As already anticipated, still few and mostly recent are the studies on the epistles which compose the ninth book, a sign of a renewed interest in the themes they deal with, which need a deep and not fragmentary reconsideration, in the framework, precisely, of a unitary and organic interpretation. Among these, in addition to Venarucci's already cited papers on the epistle 77, particularly interesting appear Correa's study, on the Senecan use of functional *exempla* for a good death in the epistles 77 and 78 (Correa 2021) and on the *libertas* from the fiction of social conventions in the epistle 80 (Correa 2023), or the reflection of Vogt-Spira 2021 on the concept of *imitatio* in the epistle 79, or even the contribution of Berno 2016 regarding the relationship between truth and fiction of happiness between epistles 76 and 80. This list would be enough to underline the intuition within the bibliography of connections between the ninth book's epistles, also signalled, as we will take care to investigate, by lexical clues: for example, the polyptotus of *fictum* (*ep.* 75, 1) in the concluding epistle (*ep.* 80, 6: *ficta*), a perfect participle with the function of an adjective which rarely occurs in the Senecan work, and it doesn't seem to me to be a coincidence at all that it occurs in the incipit and in the concluding epistle of the ninth book, as if to suggest a *Ringkomposition*. Furthermore, numerous other significant terms occur, in *variatio*, many times within the epistles which compose the book: *vita*, *mors*, *honestum*, *libertas*, *natura*, *ratio* are only a part of these, which seem to suggest, indeed, the idea of a unitarian and well-architected compositional structure, which harmoniously supports the progressive development of Senecan thought. The analysis of the lexicon and its occurrences will prove to be, in this sense, a further functional tool for verifying the hypothesis according to which the ninth book is constructed as an intentionally organic and complete unit, not only on a thematic level, but also on a formal level.

The network of referrals will be the object of attention not only within the ninth book, but also, more generally, within the entire correspondence, with a particular focus on the eighth and tenth books, in order to ascertain whether the progressive structure which seems to emerge from the reading of the ninth book doesn't connect, from a wider perspective, with the compositional structure of the *Epistulae*, in a game of summaries of what precedes and anticipations of what follows.



Eventually, the Senecan relationship, within the ninth book, with his Greek and Latin sources will be given great importance: for what concerns the cited Greek sources, certainly a preeminent role is occupied by Aristotelian, Epicurean and Stoic philosophy, of which the monograph of Setaioli 1988 remains a general point of reference, while, on the relationship with Stoicism, the essays of Inwood 2005, Veyne 2003 and Griffin 1976 are still valid. Despite the wide literature on the topic, this theme within the ninth book still appears to be little covered, neglected by the rich essay of Setaioli 1988, and would deserve a deeper study in this sense too. Moreover, the interest in this theme is high in recent years, particularly with respect to Senecan reception of Epicureanism, as demonstrated, for example, by an article just published by Maso 2024.

Even the analysis of the rewriting of Latin sources, specifically Cicero, but also Vergil and Catullus, will permit a better comprehension of Senecan thought's development across the ninth book: recent studies hypothesize Catullian echoes in the ninth book (Allegrì 2011), worthy of further study, while Vergil is explicitly the object of direct quotation in the book. Cicero's presence in the ninth book appears to have been little studied, despite the fact that, regarding his influence on Senecan works, there are some important studies (Fedeli 2006), also in reference to the *Epistulae* (Gatti 2023, Torre 2021, Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2018): above all, the ninth book's epistles, especially in reference to the reflection on the *honestum*, on living according to *natura* and also on the *officia* (cf. *ep.* 77, 19: *officia vitae*), as well as on the concept of *vir bonus*, seem to me to rewrite several passages of the *De officiis*, especially of the third book, which investigates the relationship between *honestum* and *utile*, still little studied in the bibliography. A research of this kind could contribute on the one hand to reveal the peculiarities of Seneca's position compared to that of Cicero, on the other to shed further light on the fortune of the *De officiis*.

The plan of the research work, in its various phases, could be structured as follows:

1. Proposal for an Italian translation of the ninth book, based on the critical edition of Reynolds 1965, which differs from the main translations in circulation, such as that of Giuseppe Monti, already dating back and simply re-proposed, with some corrections and updates (Monti 2021), or the more recent translation by Rosanna Marino (Marino 2016), for a greater adherence to the letter of the text, capable of highlighting, as far as possible, the rhetorical-stylistic aspects of the Latin original, but above all to restore and facilitate, also in terms of lexical rendering, the search for internal references, anaphoras, polyptotes, etymological figures. The translation is expected to be completed within the first semester of the first year;
2. Drafting of a commentary on each epistle of the ninth book, characterized by the detailed analysis of selected passages functional to the analysis of the structure of the epistle and the book, of the most significant lemmas and their occurrences, within the epistle and in the others of the ninth book, of the philosophical themes, of the internal and external intertextuality, with particular attention to the elements that signal the internal unity of the



ninth book, of the Greek and Latin sources cited, directly or indirectly, and adapted to the Senecan philosophical system, of the style, as a further means to shed light on the internal correspondences of the book. The commentary will occupy approximately one year and nine months of my research, from the second semester of the first year to the first trimester of the third year. It is hoped to carry out the eight-month mobility period, to be placed in this phase, at the University of Edinburgh, where Professor Soldo, author of the commentary on the second book of Seneca that inspired this research, is active;

3. Drafting of a general introduction to the ninth book, which, starting from a reconstruction of the state of the art on the main themes addressed in the book and on the different interpretative lines relating to the compositional structure of the *Epistulae*, with particular attention to the most recent acquisitions of criticism, illustrates the hermeneutic methodology adopted and the essential, thematic, lexical, stylistic elements, in support of the hypothesis of this project, according to which the ninth book constitutes a unitary, coherent and cohesive work within itself, to be read in progression to restore Senecan thought in its unfolding, but also in dialogue with the other books, especially the eighth and tenth. The introduction, which will include an in-depth bibliographical analysis including general, thematic and specific studies on the ninth book, will presumably be drafted within the third quarter of the third year;

Elaboration of specific introductions to each epistle of the ninth book, which review the specific bibliography, highlight possible elements of novelty and illustrate the structure and the main thematic nuclei, adopting an interpretative perspective functional to the analysis of thematic, lexical and stylistic relationships between the epistles, in line with the general introduction. This phase should be placed in the last quarter of the third year.

Objectives

The possible expected results of the project are the following:

1. Original rereading of Seneca's work, proposing a general introduction and specific introductions, a translation and a commentary of a single book of the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, namely the ninth book, which appears to be a work within the work, full of internal references. Reading the epistles in progression can in fact contribute to following interpretative paths that are rarely practiced and rich in new stimuli;
2. Drafting of a commentary capable of highlighting the internal unity of the ninth book and its relationship with the other books, identifying fundamental thematic and conceptual nodes and structuring an analytical path that captures the functional relationships for the development of a complete philosophical system, capable of encompassing human life from its beginning to its end;



3. Proposal for a translation that adheres to the letter of the text and is capable of accepting the hermeneutic perspective adopted, functional to a deeper understanding of the themes and internal coherence of the ninth book, but also of the style, understood as a vehicle for the articulation of Seneca's thought;
4. Deeper understanding of the compositional structure of the ninth book and, more generally, of the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, in the context of a debate on the question that has been very heated in recent years, of problematic resolution, and in line with the most recent and promising trends in secondary literature;
5. In-depth study of Senecan philosophical themes that are the subject of lively interest in the most up-to-date bibliography, including, in particular, the theme of voluntary death, the relationship with Aristotelian, Epicurean and especially Stoic philosophy, the relationship between authentic life, fiction and theatre;

Better understanding of Seneca's strategies of rewriting Greek and Latin, philosophical and literary sources, in particular the third book of the *De officiis*, a work at the centre of a lively and intense debate (Woolf 2023).

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