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Falling in Love with the Book: Letter 2

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Abstract – Through metaphor and example, the second of the *Epistulae morales* trains Seneca’s readers in a relationship with the text that is truly a love affair. In a book filled with many descriptions of acts of reading, this letter sketches the first of several modes of therapeutic reading that Seneca explores. While his remarks on the subject are numerous and not all consistent with one another, one can discern a coordinated effort to promote a receptive and committed style of reading that nonetheless safeguards the agency of the individual.

As we begin the study of love and friendship in Seneca’s *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, we do well to consider that intimate relationship that a person may have with a book. Books are not people, and our connection to them is different from our human relationships, both in its temporal dimension and in the kind of knowledge we can have. And yet one’s love for a book may sometimes be a passionate relationship that has many of the features of a romantic partnership: vulnerability, longing, loyalty, and the potential to alter a life. The aim of the present paper is to show that in the *Epistulae morales*, Seneca speaks about the act of reading in ways that suggest that kind of love relationship with books. He recognizes the possibility that a deep engagement with a written text can be life-changing for a reader, and he makes a deliberate effort to invite such engagement with his own work. At the same time, he is aware that love relationships can sometimes be damaging to the individual, not only those that we have with other people but also, again, those that we experience in

our reading lives, and he seeks throughout his works to ensure that the mode of reading he promotes does not become an unhealthy kind of dependency.

Seneca's authorial strategies for creating a love relationship with his readers can be traced in many aspects of the *Epistulae morales*. Indeed, it would not be wrong to say that the very design and structure of the work has this end in view, for, to be sure, it is not by accident that the correspondence appeals to the imagination and narrative instincts of the general reader, but by a deliberate authorial program.¹ Of more immediate relevance, however, are Seneca's direct instructions to the reader concerning the means by which one's relationship with books, and in particular with Seneca's own book, can be made therapeutically effective. Such instructions can be found throughout the *Epistulae morales*, sometimes accompanied by examples that the author provides from his own experience as a reader. Especially compelling in this regard is the second letter, where these important themes, introduced right at the beginning of the work, also serve a programmatic function.

I. Partnering with the proven

Letter 1 is brief but powerful, urging Lucilius to liberate himself from the slavery of the daily round by devoting his time to productive use; that is, to the study of philosophy. Coming immediately thereafter, letter 2 constitutes a second preface.² Seneca commends Lucilius, but in reality every reader of his book, for settling upon a single reading task. A series of what Tommaso Gazzarri calls 'contextual metaphors' expands on the main idea.³ The person who wants to read little bits of many different books becomes a traveler who moves from one

¹ This much is conceded even by Aldo Setaioli (2014) 193-194, who insists on the historicity of the correspondence. Further to the essential nature of the work see Cancik (1967); Maurach (1970); Mazzoli (1989); Wilson (2001); Inwood (2005) 346-347; Richardson-Hay (2006) 33-34; Inwood (2007); Conradie (2010) 60-87; Wilcox (2012); and for my own view, Graver/Long (2015) 3-4; Graver (forthcoming 2023).

² As suggested in Maurach (1970) 32. An insightful reading of the literary structure of book 1 is Richardson-Hay (2006). For detailed treatment of the content and style of letter 2 see Richardson-Hay (2006) 147-166 and von Albrecht (1986).

³ See Gazzarri (2020) 140: 'A contextual metaphor does not rely on the contiguity of tenor and vehicle qua single words; rather, it is a matter of two (or more) metaphorical foci consisting of independent sentences that are assembled to build complex narrations, in which every statement is true at a literal level, while

place to another without ever coming to rest, a guest who has many places to stay but no friends, a diner who tastes many different foods and can digest none of them, an injured limb that languishes from too many poultices, a growing plant that has been repotted too many times (*Ep.* 2.2-3):

Certis ingeniis inmorari et innutrirī oportet, si uelis aliquid trahere quod in animo fideliter sedeat. Nusquam est qui ubique est. Vitam in peregrinatione exigentibus hoc euenit, ut multa hospitia habeant, nullas amicitias; idem accidat necesse est iis qui nullius se ingenio familiariter applicant sed omnia cursim et properantes transmittunt. Non prodest cibus nec corpori accedit qui statim sumptus emittitur; nihil aequae sanitatem inpedit quam remediorum crebra mutatio; non uenit uulnus ad cicatricem in quo medicamenta temptantur; non conualescit planta quae saepe transfertur; nihil tam utile est ut in transitu prosit.

You must stay with a limited number of writers and be fed by them if you mean to derive anything that will dwell reliably with you. One who is everywhere is nowhere. Those who travel all the time find that they have many places to stay, but no friendships. The same thing necessarily happens to those who do not become intimate with any one author, but let everything rush right through them. Food does not benefit or become part of the body when it is eaten and immediately expelled. Nothing impedes healing as much as frequent change of medications. A wound does not close up when one is always trying out different dressings on it; a seedling that is transplanted repeatedly will never grow strong. Nothing, in fact, is of such utility that it benefits us merely in passing.⁴

The transition from one comparison to the next is swift and fluid, with many ideas juxtaposed and even overlapping one another. The metaphor of travel and rest is present in *inmorari*, in *sedeat*, in *hospitia*, and in *cursim et properantes*; but that of nourishment and indigestion is simultaneously present, in *innutrirī*, in *aliquid trahere*, and in *transmittunt*.⁵ Then also the idea of a loving relationship appears in *fideliter*, in

simultaneously functioning as either vehicle or tenor of another statement.' More broadly on Seneca's use of metaphor see Richardson-Hay (2006) 94-101.

⁴ English translations throughout are from Graver/Long (2015).

⁵ For *transmittere* meaning 'allow to pass through' see *OLD s.v.* 5a, with Tac. *Ann.* 13.15 ([*Britannicus*] *venenum ab ipsis educatoribus accepit tramisitque exoluta alvo*) and Sen. *Ep.* 99.5 (*adquiescamus iis quae iam hausimus, si modo non perforato animo hauriebamus et transmittente quidquid acceperat*).

amicitias, and in *familiariter*; while that of sickness and health appears not only in the segment about healing and the one about the wound, but also in *convalescit*, with reference to the plant. The effect is to create a sense of unity from multiplicity, with strong emotional impact.⁶ Books that are read in the wrong way are exhausting and debilitating, but the right book, chosen with care and studied at length, is at once a home, a good meal, a means of healing, and a dear friend.

Implicit in the passage is a conception of the reader as a person with serious deficiencies. Like the weary traveler, the hungry guest, the injured sufferer, a reader has certain elemental needs that only books can supply. Seneca's claim, however, is that a written text can meet such needs only if one approaches it in the right spirit. One has to cede some measure of control, accepting some restrictions on one's use of texts and giving up certain kinds of pleasure. In short, one has to make a commitment, exchanging novelty and variety for a deeper engagement over a longer period of time. One can compare *De tranquillitate animi* 9.4, in which Seneca remarks on the perils of owning too many books: *Onerat discentem turba, non instruit, multoque satius est paucis te auctoribus tradere quam errare per multos* ('The multitude of them burdens the reader, rather than instructing him, and it is better to hand oneself over to a few authors than to wander among many').⁷ All this is stated again in letter 2, both directly and through metaphors, as Seneca continues (*Ep.* 2.3-4):

Distringit librorum multitudo; itaque cum legere non possis quantum haberis, satis est habere quantum legas. 'Sed modo' inquis 'hunc librum evolueres uolo, modo illum'. Fastidientis stomachi est multa degustare; quae ubi uaria sunt et diuersa, inquinant non alunt. Probatos itaque semper lege, et si quando ad alios deuerti libuerit, ad priores redi.

⁶ Although not invoked by Gazzarri in this context, the passage seems to me to be a good illustration of the notion Gazzarri brings in from modern linguistics called 'conceptual blending', in which, he writes, there is 'a process of the subconscious combination and integration of elements from various domains to achieve a tightknit construal of thought and language. The prismatic effect amplified by figural clusters greatly contributes to blending conceptual spaces, in which elements coming from different vehicular domains coalesce and contribute to both a unique aesthetic experience and a uniquely performative teaching act' (Gazzarri (2020) 127-128).

⁷ *Tranq. an.* 4: *Quo innumerabiles libros et bibliothecas, quarum dominus uix tota uita indices perlegit? Onerat discentem turba, non instruit, multoque satius est paucis te auctoribus tradere quam errare per multos.*

A large number of books puts a strain on a person. So, since you cannot read everything you have, it is sufficient to have only the amount you can read. 'But I want to read different books at different times', you say. The person of delicate digestion nibbles at this and that; when the diet is too varied, though, food does not nourish but only upsets the stomach. So read always from authors of proven worth; and if ever you are inclined to turn aside to others, return afterward to the previous ones.

The use of the plural in the last sentence, in *probatos* and *priores*, makes it apparent that for Seneca, the intense relationship with a book does not have to be an exclusive partnership with a single volume. It is more like a close friendship that exists alongside other such friendships. His instructions even allow for some casual dalliance with additional books, as long as one returns always to a small shelf of favorites. But the shelf must indeed be a small one, because the kind of relationship Seneca has in mind cannot exist with many partners at once. The natural limits on one person's time and energy preclude extending it to an entire library.

Although the word *amicitia* occurs only once in this letter, the theme of friendship has a special prominence because of the epistolary format, which brings to mind always the mutual confidence between the two correspondents.⁸ We can observe also a strong parallel between the last sentence just quoted (*probatos itaque*, etc.) and the main idea of letter 3, that friends are to be trusted absolutely, but only after their character has been assessed. 'After you make a friend, you should trust him', Seneca writes, 'but before you make a friend, you should make a judgment ... Take time to consider whether or not to receive a person into your friendship, but once you have decided to do so, receive him with all your heart'.⁹ The close connection between the two letters gives us reason to interpret *probatos* in letter 2 as referring to the critical intelligence of the reader, presumably Lucilius, as he considers his choice of reading material. The point is not that Lucilius should read volumes approved by Seneca or some other authority figure;¹⁰ it is that Lucilius should devote himself to works whose value he has discovered for himself.

⁸ On the language of friendship in Roman letters see Edwards (2018) and Wilcox (2012).

⁹ *Ep. 3.2: post amicitiam credendum est, ante amicitiam iudicandum. ... Diu cogita an tibi in amicitiam aliquis recipiendus sit. Cum placuerit fieri, toto illum pectore admitte.* Hachmann (1995) 30-38 traces connections between the two letters.

¹⁰ As implied by the translation in Gummere (1917) of *probatos* as 'standard authors'.

II. Meditative engagement

The foregoing is perhaps a minute observation, but it leads us to a matter of great importance. For all that Seneca describes to us an intimate, devoted, receptive style of reading, his is not an account that involves yielding to authority. On the contrary, it requires clear goals on the part of the reader and the exercise of choice and discretion. In section 4, Seneca sums up his recommendation as follows (*Ep.* 2.4):

Aliquid cotidie aduersus paupertatem, aliquid aduersus mortem auxili compara, nec minus aduersus ceteras pestes; et cum multa percurreris, unum excerpe quod illo die concoquas.

Obtain each day some aid against poverty, something against death, and likewise against other calamities. And when you have moved rapidly through many topics, select one to ponder that day.

Having indicated that Lucilius should entrust himself to a single book or to a small number of books, Seneca now urges him to approach these books with specific aims in mind: to ‘obtain something’ from them (*aliquid compara*) that can combat fears and anxieties. While remaining within his small shelf of readings, Lucilius can even ‘move rapidly through many topics’ (*multa percurreris*), until he is ready to select some one sentence that will be beneficial to ponder at length. Once he has selected that item, he should settle down to learn from it by memorization and continued reflection. Picking up on his earlier imagery of nutrition, Seneca tells Lucilius to ‘digest’ his selection (*concoquas*); that is, to ponder it, for the Latin verb has both meanings.¹¹ The suggestion that Lucilius should read this way every day (*cotidie*) supports that same notion of intimate, long-term familiarity: as we need to eat food daily, so Lucilius needs to draw nourishment from his books each and every day.¹²

But what is involved in this pondering? Seneca explains in the last part of the letter, giving a specific example from his own reading (*Ep.* 2.5-6):

Hoc ipse quoque facio; ex pluribus quae legi aliquid adprehendo. Hodiernum hoc est quod apud Epicurum nactus sum (soleo enim et in aliena castra transire, non tamquam transfuga, sed tamquam explorator): ‘honestae’ inquit ‘res est laeta

¹¹ OLD s.v. 2.

¹² The expectation that an exercise in meditative reading should be performed on a daily basis is implied in *Ep.* 2.5, 4.10, 5.7, 6.7, 9.20, and 14.17; it is elucidated in 16.1 *hoc quod liquet firmandum et altius cotidiana meditatione figendum est*, where the sense of *meditatio* is directly parallel to Epicurus’s μελετᾶν. See further Newman (1989).

paupertas'. Illa uero non est paupertas, si laeta est; non qui parum habet, sed qui plus cupit, pauper est. Quid enim refert quantum illi in arca, quantum in horreis iaceat, quantum pascat aut feneret, si alieno imminet, si non adquisita sed adquirenda computat? Quis sit diuitiarum modus quaeris? primus habere quod necesse est, proximus quod sat est.

This is what I do as well, seizing on some item from among several things I have read. Today it is this, which I found in Epicurus—for it is my custom to cross even into the other camp, not as a deserter but as a spy: ‘Cheerful poverty is an honorable thing’. Indeed, it is not poverty if it is cheerful: the pauper is not the person who has too little but the one who desires more. What does it matter how much is stashed away in his strongbox or his warehouses, how much he has in livestock or in interest income, if he hangs on another’s possessions, computing not what has been gained but what there is yet to gain? Do you ask what is the limit of wealth? Having what one needs, first of all; then, having enough.

As above, the meditative procedure begins with an act of purposeful selection. Seneca puts the emphasis on his own independent agency as a reader, with the aggressive verb *adprehendo* and even more with the adversarial imagery of the text as an opposing military camp which he enters ‘not as a deserter but as a spy’. Once he has settled on an excerpt for his meditation, he fixes his mind upon that excerpt and lingers there, expanding it from five words to fifty-six, drawing out the time as if to suggest the slowness of digestion, the quietness of daily life. However, this meditative quietude does not imply passivity, for in spelling out his thoughts about the Epicurean *sententia* Seneca shows clearly that he has his own ideas to contribute, adding a new dimension to the point made in his chosen text. Where Epicurus had stated that it is admirable to be content with limited resources, Seneca remarks that an attitude of contentment does away with poverty altogether, and further, that the desire to increase what one has can turn ample resources into psychological poverty. The expanded version of Epicurus’s statement incorporates both Epicurus’s contribution and Seneca’s own, in a kind of collaboration between the self and the text.

To be sure, Epicurus is a rival philosopher, and Seneca has an interest in establishing that his dedication to Epicurus’s work is not that of an acolyte.¹³ In this context, however, the mention of Epicurus has little to do

¹³ The philosophical role that Epicurus plays in Seneca’s letters has been studied from a number of angles; see Graver (2016); Wildberger (2014); Inwood (2007); Maso

with philosophical allegiance and still less with any distinctive feature of Epicurean ethics. We should think rather of the approach to philosophical reading that Epicurus himself encouraged among his followers, implicitly in the provision of epitomes and key sentences from his major works and explicitly at the end of the *Letter to Menoeceus* (Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 135):

Ταῦτα οὖν καὶ τὰ τοῦτοις συγγενῆ μελέτα πρὸς σεαυτὸν ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς πρὸς τε τὸν ὅμοιον σεαυτῶ, καὶ οὐδέποτε οὐθ' ὕπαρ οὐτ' ὄναρ διαταραχθήσῃ, ζήσεις δὲ ὡς θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις. οὐθὲν γὰρ εἶκε θνητῶ ζῶν ἄνθρωπος ἐν ἀθανάτοις ἀγαθοῖς.

Meditate upon these and the related saying day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded companion, and you will never be disturbed either waking or sleeping, and you will live like a god among human beings.

The characteristic Epicurean practice of reading is (1) concentrated upon ethics (that being the content *Letter to Menoeceus*), (2) constant, taking place 'day and night', (3) conducted alone or with a single companion, and (4) aimed at personal transformation, with particular emphasis on freedom from emotional disturbance. In the early books of the *Epistulae morales*, Seneca makes a show of adopting just this kind of reading practice: quoting excerpts from a small number of books, expanding each with a bit of commentary, relating it to his personal ethical development and emotional stability, and doing all this on a daily basis with his like-minded friend Lucilius.

Unlike members of the Epicurean community, however, he is not doing this in order to internalize the main points of Epicurean ethics. His interest is in the procedure. We see that while the texts he draws upon are often by Epicurus or his followers, that is not always the case: Stoic authors and even playwrights may also serve the purpose. Even when the source is Epicurean, the content Seneca chooses to expand upon is never one of the core tenets of Epicurus's system but instead some general-purpose maxim about the dangers of wealth or the need to control one's anger. Often the sense of the quotation is altered from what would accord with Epicurean doctrine.¹⁴ Moreover, the attitude he expresses toward this reading activity is not what we would expect from a serious Epicurean. It is light and playful, a little ironical.

(1999) 83-105; Hachmann (1995) 220-237. I give an overview of Seneca's relations to Epicureanism in Graver (2020) and in Graver (forthcoming 2023).

¹⁴ This point is emphasized in Wildberger (2014) 440-442.

Excerpts taken from Epicurus's writings are impudently troped as little bits of money borrowed, or filched, from that philosopher's 'money-box'.¹⁵ Toward Epicurus himself his manner is appreciative, but certainly not reverential: at one point he compares him to the mime author Publilius Syrus; at another, he names his source as 'Epicurus or Metrodorus or somebody from that shop'.¹⁶

Eventually, in letter 33, Seneca provides a renewed explanation for his practice of excerpting texts and for the cessation of that practice at the end of Book 3. His tone is now more challenging, though still tinged with humor. *Sententiae* of the kind he has been using do a great deal for beginners in philosophy because of the ease with which they can be memorized (33.6-7). The fact that Seneca has drawn many from the works of Epicurus is incidental; the aim is for the pupil to progress to the reading of Stoic works, and to be able to appreciate those works in their entirety: rather than sample (*degustare*) the best authors, Lucilius must 'inspect them as wholes, come to grips with them as wholes' (*tota tibi inspicienda sunt, tota tractanda*, 33.5). This coming of age is not only a matter of increased capacity but also of greater independence in relation to the text. In place of his earlier metaphors of intimacy and commitment, Seneca now employs an austere imagistic vocabulary of distancing and self-command. 'Let him stand on his own feet', he says, referring to the reader (*sibi iam innitatur*, 33.7), and 'Let there be some distance between you and the book' (*aliquid inter te intersit et librum*, 33.9).

Yet the notion of a humanlike relationship with books is retained. One is to take charge of one's own life (*tutelae suae fieri*, 33.10), but one continues to be intensely involved in the reading process. There is even an element of sexual attraction in the admiration with which the maturing philosopher examines a Stoic text: 'Still, I have no objection to your studying the individual limbs, provided you retain the actual person. A beautiful woman is not the one whose ankle or shoulder is praised, but the one whose overall appearance steals our admiration away from the individual parts' (*Nec recuso quominus singula membra, dummodo in ipso homine, consideres: non est formosa cuius crus laudatur aut brachium, sed illa cuius uniuersa facies admirationem partibus singulis abstulit*, 33.5).

¹⁵ *Ep.* 26.8 *scis cuius arca utar*; compare 6.7, 12.10, 23.9, 29.10. For the element of humor see Graver (2019) 254-256, also in Graver (forthcoming 2023).

¹⁶ *Ep.* 8.8, 14.17 *Epicuri est aut Metrodori aut alicuius ex illa officina*.

III. Diversity and integration

Up to this point we have considered the philosopher's relation to books only as it is presented in letter 2 and in those subsequent letters that are clearly related to letter 2. We can now turn more briefly to statements that Seneca makes elsewhere in the *Epistulae morales* about the act of reading. Apart from the letters already mentioned, there are especially interesting passages in letter 45, where Seneca speaks of sending Lucilius a gift of books; in letter 46, where he describes his own experience reading a book authored by Lucilius; and in letter 84, the famous letter where he compares the activity of reading to the work of the honeybee. And one could mention a number of other letters in which Seneca either offers advice about reading or supplies anecdotes about his own experience as a reader.¹⁷

In some cases, the import and figurative expression of these later passages is consonant with what we have seen in letter 2. In particular, letter 45 echoes letter 2 in stressing the importance of limiting the number of books one engages with, and it also recapitulates the metaphoric language of travel and rest (*Ep.* 45.1):

... lectio certa prodest, uaria delectat. Qui quo destinauit peruenire uult unam sequatur uiam, non per multas uagetur...

Varied reading gives pleasure; selective reading does real good. If a person wants to reach his destination, he should follow just one road, not wander around over many.

Following up on the suggestion of letter 2 about an intimate relationship with the text, letter 46 shows the book itself inviting its reader to engage with it at that level (*Ep.* 46.1):

Librum tuum, quem mihi promiseras, accepi et tamquam lecturus ex commodo adaperui ac tantum degustare uolui. Deinde blanditus est ipse, ut procederem longius.... Tanta autem dulcedine me tenuit et traxit, ut illum sine ulla dilatione perlegerim.

¹⁷ In addition to the passages treated here, note the practical advice about reading offered in *Ep.* 6.4-5, 39.1-2, 88.36-41, 100.1-2, 113.1-2. For Seneca's own experience as a reader, see especially *Ep.* 40.1, 59.1-4, 59.7, 64.2-5, 67.2; and see Graver (2017).

Your book arrived as promised. I opened it, thinking to read it later at my convenience, and meaning for the moment only to take a taste; then the work itself seduced me to continue. ... Yet with such sweetness did it hold me and draw me on that I read it through without delay.

There is even an element of seduction in Seneca's language here, when he says that the book coaxed him to go further (*blanditus est ut procederem longius*) and that it held him and drew him on with its sweetness (*tanta autem dulcedine me tenuit et traxit*).¹⁸

In other letters, however, Seneca issues instructions that seem to pull in the opposite direction. Where letter 2 had urged steady, ongoing reading from a very small number of books, letter 84 favors intermittent reading from a wide variety of authors. *Diversa lectio* (84.7), rather than *certa lectio*, is the best method for developing one's own talents as a writer: one should still 'digest' what one has read (*concoquamus illa*, 84.7), but the emphasis now falls on integrating many varied elements into a unity, so that one can resemble earlier writers not as a portrait resembles its model, but as a child resembles the parent. Where letter 2 had emphasized openness and receptivity, letter 108 depicts an aggressive reader who goes hunting in the text for 'beneficial precepts and courageous and inspiring utterances that will soon find application in our lives' (*profutura praecepta et magnificas uoces et animosas, quae mox in rem transferantur*, 108.35). Now the advice is not to choose improving authors who can be trusted to address morally beneficial topics, but to extract moral guidance from any text that comes to hand, whether it be Vergil's *Aeneid* or Cicero's *De re publica*. Different readers look for different things in the same book (*Ep.* 108.29):

Non est quod mireris ex eadem materia suis quemque studiis apta colligere; in eodem prato bos herbam quaerit, canis leporem, ciconia lacertam.

Each person finds in the same material reflections suited to his own pursuits. And no wonder: in one and the same meadow the ox looks for grass, the dog for a hare, and the stork for a lizard.

The text is a grassy field, a zone of possibilities as it were, from which different kinds of reader extract different kinds of content. But Seneca's notion of strong reading is not one that simply validates all

¹⁸ Habinek (1992) somewhat overplays the innuendo.

possibilities. He does not say (and perhaps it does not matter) which animal represents the philosophical reader, but he does make it clear that the philological reader and the antiquarian reader are looking for the wrong thing. At this point, drawing nourishment from the text – even the nourishment best suited to one’s individual tastes and purposes – is not enough. One *has* to find the content that can equip a person for action.

IV. Maturity of love

It seems clear that Seneca thinks about philosophical reading in more than one way. Nonetheless, it is possible to find an underlying coherence in his directives, if we attend once more to our initial theme of friendship and love.

The relationship to the book that Seneca describes in letter 2 requires deep attention, awareness of need, long-term commitment, and a willingness to give up some measure of self-determination to incorporate another perspective, another set of ideas into one’s life. All this seems very like a love relationship that one might have with a human being. In making the comparison, though, one also becomes aware of the element of risk that may be present in an erotic relationship. Given that bonding with another person requires openness and vulnerability, there is always the possibility that attachment may shade over into obsession or an unhealthy form of dependency. In a modern context, we may be concerned about a relationship that robs a person of their agency. If we see a friend enter into that kind of relationship, we may be inclined to caution her or him against it. We might tell the friend that real love, whether that means sexual love or just close friendship, does not require anyone to be subservient, to stop making their own decisions or to give up their own point of view.

That concern about loss of agency in love is one that can also be traced in Greco-Roman antiquity. We see traces of it in the paraenetic tradition, in the diatribe of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 4.1037-1191 and also in Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.68-76. Plausibly, the *servitium amoris* trope that is such a noticeable feature of Latin love elegy was developed by the poets in reaction against this kind of moralizing discourse.¹⁹ In Stoicism, the negative potentialities of *erōs* are signaled

¹⁹ Lyne (1979) argues that the *servitium amoris* motif was the invention of the Roman

in the report of Arius Didymus that for the Stoics to call someone an erotic person is sometimes a criticism, 'as if blaming someone for love-madness'.²⁰ For while the early Stoics also put forth a strongly positive notion of erotic love in its ideal form, as exists among the wise, they saw the kind of love that is experienced by ordinary, flawed individuals as a dangerous passion that compromises human freedom in the way that every *pathos* does.²¹ Seneca in letter 116 quotes Panaetius of Rhodes (*Ep.* 116.5):

Eleganter mihi uidetur Panaetius respondisse adulescentulo cuidam quaerenti, an sapiens amaturus esset. 'De sapiente,' inquit, 'uidebimus; mihi et tibi, qui adhuc a sapiente longe absumus, non est committendum, ut incidamus in rem commotam, inpotentem, alteri emancipatam, uilem sibi.'

I think Panaetius gave a neat response to the youth who asked whether the wise man would fall in love. 'As regards the wise man,' he said, 'we shall see; but as for you and me, who are a long way from achieving wisdom, we had better refrain so as to avoid a condition that is frantic, out of control, enslaved to another, and lacking in self-worth.'

Despite the difference in philosophical standpoint between the Stoic Panaetius and the Epicurean Lucretius, their concern about erotic love as commonly experienced is strikingly similar: that it robs a person of the self-command and even the self-esteem that is necessary for rational living and the achievement of one's own happiness.

My claim here has been that even as Seneca conceives of therapeutic reading on the model of a love relationship, he is also very conscious of the pitfalls of erotic love when it takes the form of an immature infatuation. It is for this very reason that he sets limits on the practice of meditative engagement with the text. Already within letter 2 he begins to establish a role for the independent agency and critical intelligence of the reader; as his work proceeds, that emphasis becomes more and more pronounced. The love of books is for him a complex love that contains within it a productive tension. Devotion to the text shifts the balance of the power away from the self, only to empower that self in a new and better way.

elegiac poets, most likely Propertius, as a countercultural rejection of prevailing mores.

²⁰ Stob 2.7.5b9 65W = von Arnim (1921–24) vol 3, frag. 717.

²¹ See Graver (2007) 185–189; Nussbaum (1995).

This notion of independent agency is very much in keeping with a larger pattern in Imperial Stoicism that has been elucidated by Gretchen Reydam-Schils. Drawing on Epictetus as well as Seneca, Reydam-Schils argues that Stoics put a greater emphasis on self-development for the sake of action in the world than either Platonists or Epicureans did, and that they attached correspondingly less authority to the founding figures of their school. Making a figurative application of the remark of Panaetius quoted above, she writes (Reydam-Schils (2011) 320):

Whether it is misdirected eros for another human being that puts one at the risk of subservience, as Panaetius would have it in the anecdote with which we started, or an undue attachment to philosophical studies makes no difference; both attitudes are equally wrong-headed. Ultimately it is Zeus, the divine principle, who has entrusted us to ourselves, as a duty that cannot be transferred to anybody else.

This statement rings true not only for Seneca's approach to philosophical studies generally but more specifically for his remarks about the handling of books. But we can also expand the comparison to express what is valuable in the reading process as well as what must be avoided. For, just as Stoicism rejects the popular notion of erotic love and yet has room for a reimagined form of erotic love among the wise, so also there is a meaningful and beneficial way to fall in love with books, provided one enters the relationship in the right spirit: a spirit of intense devotion that maintains one's own integrity as an agent, a spirit of adventure that looks constantly toward right action.

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