

The Classical Bulletin

Published monthly from November through April by the Department of Classical Languages at Saint Louis University, Saint Louis, Missouri 63103. Subscription price: \$2.00 a year. Second-class postage paid at Saint Louis, Missouri.

VOLUME 49

JANUARY 1973

NUMBER 3

Seneca's *Epistle* 57: A Journey to Wisdom

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

—T. S. Eliot*

The present authors have previously dealt with a number of Seneca's epistles and their art, exploring especially the nature and purpose of Senecan wit.¹ Here we wish carefully to examine *Epistle* 57—a single work which, combining the virtues of dramatic fiction and of essay,² achieves unity and completeness. In fact, *Epistle* 57 may serve virtually as a paradigm of Alexandrian form and art, accomplishing Callimachean fulness in a little place.³

Frequently in his letters to Lucilius, Seneca commences by recounting an incident or narrating an event about himself that straightway plunges him into a ludicrous plight. One might recall *Ep.* 12, where Seneca, returning at length to his country-estate, is utterly bewildered to find his property aging and tumble-down. He even irascibly inquires who a certain old "dotard" is—only to be informed that this unknown and wizened *senex* is Felicio,⁴ who in his youth had been little Seneca's favorite slave. In such an exemplum, the philosopher has displayed impatience, forgetfulness, senility, and spleen; he is certainly self-portrayed as ludicrous fool.

Such scenes detailing Senecan foibles are particularly painted at full length in epistles numbering in the 50's; most of them depict a Seneca unphilosophically, frantically, and with apparent aimlessness chasing in Rome or touring Campania. In 51 he enters Baiae only to depart the following day. In 53 he is so atrem-

ble upon a voyage in the Bay of Naples that he plunges overboard and suddenly clammers ashore to an embarrassing safety. In *Ep.* 55 he visits and praises Vatia's Villa, ultimately condemning, however, idle leisure—of the very sort which brought him, on his litter, upon the scene! Similarly, *Ep.* 56 discovers in Rome a Seneca who had sought isolation (and monastic calm)—above a Bathhouse, surrounded by terrific urban clamor and din; abruptly, at epistle's end, he abandons his resolution, and moves away. All of these false starts, missteps, and unsettling endings, are nonetheless brazenly set in the context of *Ep.* 52's solemn Lecture on Choosing Guidance Counsellors and avoiding Agitation!

... quid conluctatur cum animo nostro nec
permittit nobis quicquam semel velle?
Fluctuamur inter varia consilia. . . .⁵

Ep. 57 is no exception to these scenes of contradiction and folly. As a kind of counterpoint to the sea-voyage of 53, *Ep.* 57 firmly fixes our landbound traveller—in the mud. Like Horace stumbling toward Brundisium, the only heroic action to befall Seneca on his journey to Naples is the contention of earth, both wet and dry. "Duo incommoda inter se contraria simul pertulimus: eadem via, eodem die et luto et pulvere laboravimus" (57.2).⁶ Like the sturdy athlete, he is "anointed" with both: "a ceromate nos happe excepit in crypta Neapolitana" (57.1). Taking the short route, through the Naples tunnel, the philosopher is covered with dirt, choked with dust, immersed in blackness. Among other paradoxes, Seneca grimly observes that the feeble torches only serve to enhance the darkness.⁷

Not only is the scene here mock-epical, placing the philosopher in a silly plight while shed-

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ding on him a darkened light, but the letter is also replete with logical contradiction. For, despite the gloom, the battle, and the terrible dark, the philosopher (not courageous enough to venture upon another trip at sea) feels not the least fear ("sine metu"), but rather exuberance ("sensi quendam ictum animi," 57.3). Yet immediately he confesses that, in speaking of such fearless alertness, he is *not* referring to himself:

Non de me nunc tecum laquor, qui multum
ab homine tolerabili, nedum a perfecto
absum, sed de illo in quem fortuna ius
perdidit . . . (57.3).

Seneca in the tunnel is left behind, and we are travelling now with an ideal (and hypothetical) Stoic Sage. In this digression, Seneca pauses to refute the traditional Stoic concept that the *sapiens* transcends emotion; on the contrary, Seneca surprisingly argues, the sage will blanch ("mutabitur color") and shudder ("inhorrescet"); for he too is governed by emotions ("naturalis adfectio inexpugnabilis rationi," 57.4). Brave men may often, he explains, feel shock and revulsion, and even faint.⁸ Shortly thereafter, Seneca is again refuting a general doctrine (that he terms "Stoical"), namely, that a man crushed beneath a great weight will have his soul fragmented and dispersed.⁹

Then, just as abruptly as Seneca had transferred his own journey in the tunnel to the shoulders of the courageous "wise man," he now reassumes the journey in his own person: he sees the light, and emerges from the cave. From such an experience he is able to argue, in conclusion, that the soul is indeed everlasting, and will ever emerge from the tomb of darkness into an immortal light.

Once again, the reader is confronted with an essay that begins upon a trifling, an anti-heroic and comical note, that thereafter courses through alterations and contradictions, only to conclude in gravity and seriousness. What should impress us is precisely Seneca's ability to form such contraries into a unity. Most impressively, this multitude of ideas, this parcel of paradox and wit, is unified by the dominant theme of journey, by the central fictional image of the darkling tunnel.

In terms of fictional progress, Seneca himself has entered the underground mine, pressed forward against gloomy obstacles, until he has again reached the light. Interestingly enough, such a descent into a cave is traditionally a mythic and religious experience, and Robert Turcan is nearly right when he refers to *Ep.* 57 in a note and observes Seneca's "souci de communiquer au lecteur quelque chose de l'ambiance religieuse . . . au spectacle des processions isiaques."¹⁰ In actuality, myths of a *descensus ad inferos* appear in almost every mythology.¹¹ Innumerable deities (such as Attis, Osiris, Adonis, Persephone, Baal, Dionysus, Innana) endure the classic Descent that, as an archetype of seasonal change, leads to subsequent rebirth, ascent, and return. Innumerable heroes, furthermore—Heracles, Aghat, Orpheus, Cuchulain, Theseus, and later, Aeneas and Dante—re-enact this self-same journey.¹² Odysseus in the Homeric epic not only "descends" into the Underworld in Book 11, but, as William S. Anderson has shown, Odysseus' seven-year captivity on the isle of Ogygia portrays residence in *another* Land of the Dead,¹³ as do, it may be similarly urged, his adventures among the Lotus-Eaters, with Circe the enchantress, and in Polyphemus' cave. Odysseus must literally harrow innumerable hells, before he may return in safety "home."

In every one of these cases, the entry into the cave or shady grove is a necessity; death *must* be confronted (and endured) if revivification is to follow. Thus Livy's Numa *must* consort with Egeria in a dark grotto (1.21.3), and Plato's neophytes *must* commence life in the Cave (*Republic* 7.514A-517B) if they are ever to "transcend" it and rise "to see the light." More recent legends of the Seven Sleepers and of Rip Van Winkle remind us that a sleep *must* be endured, if the sleepers are to awaken. And Maynard Mack recalls that, in the eighteenth century, "the tradition of the Sage in a holy cave was in any case widespread and so powerful that it persisted well into the nineteenth century."¹⁴

The sun too, in its daily setting and revival, was traditionally conceived as travelling this selfsame infernal course, passing beneath the Western mountains, through a dark channel,

to renewal in the East—and to light.¹⁵ Just such a solar and questing journey is made by the Sumerian and Babylonian hero, Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh aspires, although a mortal, to discover Dilmun, Paradise, "the garden of the sun," and to ask the ultimate questions "concerning the living and the dead." To do so, he must make the incredible journey to the great mountain called Mashu, "which guards the rising and the setting sun." Intrepidly, he enters the dread gateway and

... followed the sun's road to his rising, through the mountain. When he had gone one league the darkness became thick around him, for there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. [And so far each of the next six leagues.] When he had gone eight leagues Gilgamesh gave a great cry, for the darkness was thick and he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After nine leagues he felt the north wind on his face, but the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. After ten leagues the end was near. After eleven leagues the dawn light appeared. At the end of twelve leagues the sun streamed out. [He was in] the garden of the gods.¹⁶

Important, too, is our identification of such a night journey both with actual death and with the initiatory rites of the mystery-cults of apotheosized heroes: "... when [the point of death] comes," Plutarch explains, concerning initiation rites,

[the soul] has an experience like that of men who are undergoing initiation into great mysteries; and so the verbs *teleutan* (die) and *teleisthai* (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity. In the beginning there is straying and wanderings, the weariness of running this way and that, and nervous journeys through darkness that reach no goal, and then immediately before the consummation every possible terror, shivering and trembling and sweating and amazement. But after this a marvelous light meets the wanderer, and open country and meadow lands welcome him; and in that place there are voices and dancing and the solemn majesty of sacred music and holy visions. And amidst these, he walks at large in new freedom, now perfect and fully initiated. ..."

Seneca's artful *Epistle* 57 details, fictionally and in little, just such a journey and initiation of the wise man. He has descended like the dead, "in crypta Neapolitana" (57.1), and like the Orphic initiates, he has been bathed and immersed in Mud.¹⁸ Akin to visitants at the cave of Trophonius with their honey-cake, he has descended seeking self-knowledge and fulfillment—and has successfully reemerged.¹⁹ In miniature, as it were, Seneca has fully united

myth with plot (*mythos*), fictionally creating and rehearsing a Progress of the Soul. The course of action within the epistle is exactly wedded to the process of his argument. For in both the action and in his argument, he has descended into the crypt, been frightened and confounded, until ultimately suffering a "mutation" (57.3,6), until he and his epistle "per exigum foramen est reditus" (57.8).

Seneca's own mental and physical journey in this letter, of course, portrays the struggles of a Stoic *proficiens* who wishes to become the *sapiens*. But Seneca's imaginative art consists in his utilizing imagery from the great myths of *descensus* and from initiation rites in generating, as Plato had done before him, his plot. Despite his humor and his contradictions, and perhaps even because of them, his letter frames a coherent medallion precisely recounting the *sapiens'* initiation. As if approaching his *peri-pateia* with a honey-cake, Seneca himself has struggled without sight, until at length his thought achieves the light.

It is Seneca's Art that secures for him the measure of his success, and his carefully wrought imaginative creation that has conducted his argument, like the Orphic initiate, to a final joyous enlightenment.

Intellegis . . . sequi perpetuam tranquillitatem, libertatem depulsis iis, quae aut irritant nos aut terant; nam voluptatibus et timoribus proiectis . . . ingens gaudium subit, inconcussum et aequale, tum pax et concordia animi . . . (*De Vita Beata* 3.4).

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NOTES

- 1 For general treatment of Senecan humor and *ingenium*, consult our *Paradoxum Senecae: The Epicurean Stoic*, *CW* 62 (1968) 37-42, and "Senecan Irony," *CB* 45 (1968) 6-11. We explore the artistry of particular epistles in "Epistle 56: Seneca's Ironic Art," *CP* 56 (1970) 102-105, in "Et Terris Iactatus et Alto: The Art of Seneca's Epistle 53," *AJP* 92 (1971), 217-25, and in "Descensus Averno in Seneca's Ep. 55," to appear shortly in *CJ*. 2 For a recent and useful treatment of the dramatic qualities in Seneca's prose, see B. L. Hijman, Jr., "Drama in Seneca's Stoicism," *TAPA* 97 (1966) 237-51. Long ago Richard M. Gummere stressed that Seneca was "more of an essayist than any other Roman," in his "The English Essay and some of its Ancient Prototypes," *CW* 14 (April 4, 1921) 154-60. 3 Seneca himself praises such achievements in others: "magni artificis est cluisse totum in

exiguo" (*Ep.* 53.11). 4 The irony of the old slave's name is obvious enough. 5 *Ep.* 32.1; all citations from the *Epistulae Morales* refer to the OCT, ed. L. D. Reynolds (1965). Hereafter, references to the letters will be incorporated (within parentheses) in the body of our text. Seneca is an excellent and accurate reporter of those modern urban diseases (even in himself), *ennui* and restlessness. See esp. his *De Tranq. An.* 6 Jonathan Swift, in a mock-epical poem filled with allusions to the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* likewise plays with an heroic war, in a mere rainstorm, of dirt and water: Not yet, the Dust had shun'd th' unequal Strife, / But aided by the Wind, fought still for Life; / And Wafted with its Foe by violent Gust, / 'Twas doubtful which was Rain, and which was Dust ("A Description of a City Shower," lines 23-26). 7 This is a traditional paradox. Speaking of his descent to the nether world, Job had conceived of a land of shadow, "where the light is as darkness" (*Job* 10.22). Milton gave the paradox renown by his description of Hell: "A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible . . ." (*PL* 1.61-63). Milton has often, wrongly, been chastized for employing such paradox and oxymoron. It is true, however, that lesser authors do stumble and fall when venturing upon such ground; see, for instance, Pope's mockery of bathetic writers who attempt to follow Milton's "visible darkness," only to come to grief (*Peri Bathous or Of The Art of Sinking in Poetry* [1727], Chap. 11). 8 This is not Seneca's usual view; the *sapiens*, he more commonly argues, is self-sufficient: *Ep.* 9.1, 3-5, 8, 12-19; 55.4; 72.7; *De Vita Beata* 26.4; *Ad Helv.* 5.1; 13.4; *De Benef.* 7.2.4-5; 7.3.2-3; 7.8.1. Moreover, although Seneca concedes that the *sapiens* might experience the "shadows" of emotions, he most frequently emphasizes the *sapiens'* freedom from emotions entirely: *Ep.* 85.2-16, 24-29, 41; *De Ira* 1.14.1; 2.6.3; 2.10.6-7; *De Clem.* 2.5.4-5; 2.6.1-2. 9 Concerning this doctrine, see R. D. Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean* (London 1910) 61, and E. Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge 1911) 264. 10 *Sénèque et les religions orientales* (Bruxelles 1967) 55-56. 11 For the nearly universal conception of the "pit, hole, spring, or cavern" as gateway or entrance to the lower world, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, Ind. 1966) esp. items F80 and F92. In the medieval period, Celts and other tribes similarly identified the Underworld as inside a grave mound or under a hill; see Howard Rollin Patch, "Some Elements in Medieval Descriptions of the Otherworld," *PMLA* 33 (1918) esp. 611-14. 12 See, for instance, Theodor H. Gaster, *The Oldest Stories in the World* (New York 1952) 34-42. "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return . . .," asserts Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York 1956) 30. Campbell sketches the outlines of a pervasive pattern enacted by innumerable gods and heroes, that he terms the "monomyth" (pp. 245-46); phases of this pattern include, among others, "The Call to Adventure," "The Crossing of the First Threshold," "The Belly of the Whale," "The Road of Trials," "Atonement with the Father," and "Apotheosis" (p. 36). A useful and thorough examination of patterns of initiation and descent is Mircea Eliade's *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York 1965). 13 "Calypso and Elysium," *CJ* 54 (1958) 2-11. 14 "The Shadowy Cave": Some Speculations on a Twickenham Grotto," in *Restoration and 18th-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop*, ed. Carol Camden (Chicago 1963) 77. 15 For conceptions of the sun's journey to the

nether world in Egypt, see W. Max Muller, *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston 1918) 12. 26-27; in Armenia, Mardiros H. Ananikian, *ibid.* (Boston 1925) 7. 49-50; in Canaan, Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York 1961) 127, 215, esp. 226-30. 16 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sanders (Baltimore 1964) 96-97. For Carl Jung's treatment of the underground journey as one of psychic progress, see his *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, trans. H. G. & Mary F. Baynes (New York 1928) 40. 17 Plutarch (?), "On The Soul," *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. 15, trans. F. H. Sandbach (Cambridge, Mass. 1969) 317, 319. We are especially indebted here to discussion of W. R. Halliday, "The Mystery Religions," *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (Liverpool 1925) 234-80, and of Maud Bodkin, "The Archetype of Paradise-Hades, or of Heaven and Hell," *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London 1963) 90-152. 18 Concerning darkness and mud, and their role in punishing victims in Hades, as well as their employment in Orphic initiations, see Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis (New York 1966) 1.240 and 248-49 n. 15. 19 For a full account of the procedure for visiting the oracle in the cave of Trophonius at Lebadeia, consult Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9.39.1-3, 40.4.

Philoctetes on Lemnos*

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* suggests certain striking parallels of setting and characterization to the Cyclops episode of the *Odyssey*. Close investigation reveals the playwright's own identification of Philoctetes with Polyphemus. These two figures, in turn, are bound to Olympian Hephaestus in a historical, mythological, and religious nexus which an Athenian audience of the fifth century would recognize to exist on Lemnos, the setting of the play.

The features which Philoctetes and Hephaestus share are obvious: they are both lame; they both inhabit Lemnos (whether it be populated or unpopulated); and they both arrive as outcasts. In a historical context, Hephaestus has one of his most important cult centers on Lemnos at Hephaestia or Hephaestias.¹ Homer, in what may be an aetiological explanation of the founding of the cult, recounts Hephaestus' rude landing on the island after being flung from Olympus by Zeus (*Il.* 1.590ff.). Philoctetes himself gives due regard to the fire-god's dominion over the island in his reference to Hephaestus' blaze (986f.; cf. 800). In addition, Philoctetes and Hephaestus share this in common, that whereas the latter is the god of fire, the former makes fire by rubbing stone against stone and depends on fire as the one element, the symbol, which maintains life (295-