

### SOME IDEAS OF SENECA’S ON BEAUTY\*

It is no easy task to reconstruct a consistent aesthetical theory from Seneca’s writings. Even those scholars, such as Svoboda<sup>1</sup>, who uphold the existence of a Senecan aesthetics, must recognize that our philosopher never poses the question of the nature of the beautiful, which lies at the foundation of any aesthetics. The lamented Italo Lana<sup>2</sup> goes as far as stating that Seneca’s pronouncements about art – and particularly about poetry – are never based “upon criteria of aesthetical criticism, which is totally missing” (p. 378). Lana considered Svoboda’s essay nothing but a mere list of all Senecan passages which could somehow be linked with aesthetics (p. 378). In fact, the mobility of Seneca’s *ingenium* often causes him to touch on a subject from different points of view rather than tackling it directly and systematically. It remains true, however, that Seneca often proceeds well beyond the moralistic approach, which was not only typical of his school but also of his own ostensible attitude. I believe that, if only intermittently and sometimes perhaps unwittingly, Seneca does exceed his own moralistic premises and attains original and in many ways surprisingly ‘modern’ positions. I think I have demonstrated this in my books, at least as far as his literary theories are concerned. In this area the novelty of some of his positions always stems from the grafting of a serious philosophical approach onto the purely rhetorical method prevailing in the culture of contemporary Rome. Today, however, we intend to sketch a picture of a wider conceptual range, in which Seneca’s literary theories function as just one of several aesthetic elements – in other words to investigate his more general ideas about the beautiful in nature and art.

We have just remarked that reconstructing an organic and consistent posi-

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<sup>1</sup> K. Svoboda, *Les idées esthétiques de Sénèque*, in *Mélanges de philologie, de littérature et d’histoire offerts à J. Marouzeau par ses collègues et élèves étrangers*, Paris 1948, 537-546. More essays on the subject are listed in A. Balbo - L. Giordano - M. Guerra - M. Guglielmo - E. Malaspina - S. Rota - R. Strocchio - B. Villa, *Bibliografia senecana del XX secolo*. Ideata e diretta da I. Lana, a cura di E. Malaspina (Pubblicazioni del Dipartim. di filologia, linguistica e tradizione classica Augusto Rostagni 23, Univ. di Torino), Bologna 2005.

<sup>2</sup> I. Lana, *Seneca e la poesia*, “Rivista d’Estetica” 6, 1961, 377-396.

tion from Seneca's scattered statements is anything but an easy task. This is hardly surprising, given the almost deliberately unsystematic character of his writings. Nevertheless, it would surely be mistaken to think that his work was born in a vacuum; our analysis should never lose sight on the one hand of Stoic philosophy, to which Seneca constantly refers, and on the other of the more hotly debated questions in the contemporary cultural milieu.

We shall commence from a somehow unusual passage, in which Seneca presents the reader with his ideal of feminine beauty: *ep.* 33.5 *non est formosa illa cuius crus laudatur aut brachium, sed illa cuius universa facies admirationem partibus singulis abstulit* ("a woman is beautiful not when one of her legs or her arms is praised, but when her whole figure does not permit to admire her separate parts"). In this formulation we recognize the ancient Greek conception of beauty, which had also been accepted by the Stoics. In fact, the Stoics placed the beauty of the body in the proportionate correspondence and harmony (συμμετρία) of the limbs with one another, according to Chrysippus's definition: ἡ δ' ἐν τοῖς μέλεσι συμμετρία ἢ ἀσυμμετρία κάλλος ἢ αἴσχος (*SVF* III 471, p. 121, 29: "beauty and ugliness are the result of harmony or disproportion of the limbs"; cf. also *SVF* III 472). Cicero added color: *Tusc.* 4.31 = *SVF* III 279 *corporis est apta figura membrorum cum coloris quadam suavitate, eaque dicitur pulchritudo* ("there exists a harmonious arrangement of the limbs in the body, joined with a pleasing color, and this is what is called beauty"). This definition given by Cicero seems to rely more on sense perception, in as much as it adds a purely visual element such as color. In Philo of Alexandria too we find a definition very close to Cicero's<sup>3</sup>. Actually, Seneca seems to lay stress on the whole itself rather than on the harmony of the several parts; therefore, one might think that, rather than the συμμετρία of the old Stoics, he had the πρέπον or *decorum* in mind, the idea of the "fitting", which had also been inherited from ancient Greek conceptions, but had assumed a special and peculiar importance at Rome, under the influence of Panaetius and of Cicero. In fact, the συμμετρία can be identified with the harmony of the limbs with one another, whereas the πρέπον or *decorum* results more specifically from the several parts fitting the whole<sup>4</sup>. However, another definition of the beauty of the body by Chrysippus was couched in these terms: τὸ κάλλος τοῦ σώματος ἐστὶ συμμετρία τῶν μελῶν καθεστώτων αὐτῷ πρὸς ἄλληλά τε καὶ πρὸς τὸ ὅλον (*SVF* III 278: "the beauty of the body consists

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *SVF* III 392 τὸ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ σώματος (κάλλος) ἐν συμμετρίας μερῶν καὶ εὐχροία τε καὶ εὐσαρκία κεῖται.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Storia dell'estetica*. I. *L'estetica antica*, Ital. transl., Turin 1979, 227.

in the symmetry of its limbs in relation to one another *and to the whole*"). It is not necessary, therefore, to surmise that Seneca's formulation diverges from the most orthodox tradition of Stoicism.

In the passages of Chrysippus we have just quoted the definition of bodily beauty is followed by a similar definition of the beauty of the soul; the latter too is the result of a *συμμετρία*: the harmony of the mind and its "parts" or faculties in relation both to one another and to the soul as a whole (*SVF* III 278 τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς κάλλος ἐστὶ συμμετρία τοῦ λόγου καὶ τῶν μερῶν αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸ ὅλον τε καὶ πρὸς ἄλληλα: cf. *SVF* III 279 and 471a). It is true, on the other hand, that Galen criticized Chrysippus, because, in his opinion, he had not clearly defined the nature of the parts whose balance and harmony was supposed to produce the beauty of the soul.

This pairing of body and soul is important, in as much as it allows us to comprehend that, according to the Stoics, there was not, nor could ever be, any distinction between ethical beauty and aesthetical beauty, in the modern, and etymological, meaning of the word, that is "perceived by the senses". Even in Cicero and Philo of Alexandria, where the purely visual notion of "color" is added to the more intellectual and, so to speak, "geometrical" and formal idea of harmony of the parts, the definition of bodily beauty is placed side by side with that of the beauty of the soul, with no perceptible trace of a qualitative distinction between the two.

In fact, in Stoicism the source of all beauty is the *Λόγος* which pervades the universe; there is no difference, therefore, between the good and the beautiful, nor between virtue and beauty. From this point of view we can truly say that the Stoics accepted and developed with the utmost consistency the ancient Greek equation which is expressed in the formula *καλὸς κἀγαθός*. Nor, according to them, can any qualitative difference be established between natural and artistic beauty: the former is the visible side of the cosmic *Λόγος*, the latter of the human *λόγος*, which, when it is "right" (*ὀρθὸς λόγος*) is the faithful reflection of the former. Therefore, when Seneca repeats the old Greek idea that art is the imitation of nature – *ep.* 65.3 *omnis ars naturae imitatio est* –, his words must be read in the light of this Stoic position. We shall return to this later on. For the moment, we shall remark that, like the poet Horace (*epist.* 1.2.3), Seneca sometimes translates the Greek concept of *καλόν* with *pulchrum*, a term which remains within the aesthetical area, just like the Greek word. In a letter he writes: *ad omne pulchrum vir bonus sine ulla cunctatione procurret* ("the good man will run with no hesitation to everything that is beautiful": *ep.* 66.12; cf. 67.6). The more usual translation of the Greek *καλόν* was rather *honestum*, "honorable", a word originally related to the political domain.

The cosmos in which we live is beautiful because it is the visible manifes-

tation of the universal Λόγος. According to the Stoics' monistic doctrine, rationality, the λόγος, does not reside in a world above our own, but unfolds itself in this one. A fragment of Posidonius' states this idea explicitly: καλὸς ὁ κόσμος· δῆλον δ' ἐκ τοῦ σχήματος καὶ τοῦ χρώματος καὶ τοῦ μεγέθους καὶ τῆς περὶ τὸν κόσμον τῶν ἄστρον ποικιλίας (Posid. F 364 Theiler: "the cosmos is beautiful: this is evident from its shape, its colors, its size and the variety of the celestial bodies surrounding it"). And it was precisely the beauty of the cosmos which first suggested to men the idea of God.

So, the beauty of nature was one of the basic principles of Stoic philosophy; but Seneca adds to mere doctrine his personal receptivity to the fascination of natural sights. At times he even appears to anticipate the taste and sensitivity of the Romantic movement. In a passage of the *Epistles* he avows to be charmed by the beauty of dark forests and deep caves: *ep. 41.3 si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli <densitate> ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numinis faciet. Si quis specus saxi penitus exesis montem suspenderit, non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxitatem excavatus, animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet. Magnorum fluminum capita veneramur; subita ex abdito vasti amnis eruptio aras habet; coluntur aquarum calentium fontes, et stagna quaedam vel opacitas vel immensa altitudo sacravit* ("if you find yourself in a forest thick with ancient trees exceeding the usual height, which obstructs the vision of the sky through several layers of branches placed one above the other, the height of the wood, its secluded location, and the marvel before a darkness so thick and continuous in the open wilderness will make you believe in a divine presence. If a cave, not an artificial one, but one whose wide hollowness has been produced by natural causes, has created a vast vault in the sheer rock, it will strike your soul with a religious shiver. The sources of great rivers receive a cult; where great veins of water erupt from hidden depths we erect altars; hot springs are also revered; some lakes are deemed to be sacred because of the darkness of their location or their unmeasurable depth").

This is an extremely complex passage. First of all we shall remark that the shiver, mid-way between aesthetic and religious, before wild and uncontaminated nature described in this page follows closely upon a Vergilian quotation which Seneca has introduced in order to illustrate the Posidonian idea of the inner god residing within each righteous man: *ep. 41.2 in unoquoque virorum bonorum '(quis deus incertum est) habitat deus'* (Verg. *Aen.* 8.352: "inside every good man 'a god dwells – we do not know which

one'''). In the *Aeneid* Euander refers these words to the wood and the rock of Capitol hill still in its wild, primeval condition, before the founding of Rome. According to a frequently employed procedure, which I have studied elsewhere a long time ago, here the philosopher transforms the original meaning of the poet's words by assuming them as an integral part of his own discourse. In this instance he refers Virgil's expression not to a physical place, as in the context of the poet, but to the soul of the good man. However, the suggestion created by the poetical context from which he extracts these words is still active, and urges Seneca to describe equally wild, uncontaminated places causing a religious shiver, just like Capitol hill in its primeval state does in the *Aeneid*. We should also observe that this description of uncontaminated nature serves as a foil for the ethical description, in the following paragraphs, of the good man, whose soul produces a similar religious shiver and an equal reverence. Here we are faced with a clear evidence of the perfect equivalence of aesthetical and ethical beauty according to the Stoic conception we have mentioned before.

One could object that the emotion described by Seneca in this page appears to be of religious rather than aesthetical nature. Roman religion did provide for worship of woods, springs, etc. And Quintilian, referring to Ennius, compares his outdated poetry to sacred woods, *in quibus grandia et antiqua robora iam non tantam habent speciem quantam religionem* (Quint. 10.1.88: "where the great and ancient oak-trees by now appear more venerable than beautiful"). But that religious sensitivity does not exclude aesthetic sensitivity is demonstrated by another letter, in which the soul of the good and wise man is described in unequivocal terms of *pulchritudo*, which are joined with no apparent problem with allusions of religious nature: *ep. 115.3 si nobis animus boni viri liceret inspicere, o quam pulchram faciem, quam sanctam... videremus!* ("if it were possible for us to see the soul of the good man, what a holy and beautiful vision that would be!"); and a little farther down (§ 5): *nonne velut numinis occursu obstupefactus resistat...?* ("wouldn't he stop, as thunderstruck by the appearance of a god?"). In this passage too Seneca has recourse to Vergil to lend effectiveness to his description – he quotes the words by which Aeneas addresses his mother Venus before recognizing her, in the first book of the poem (*ep. 115.5 ~ Verg. Aen. 1.327-328; 330*).

It is debatable to which extent the sensitivity apparent in Seneca for the fascination of wild, unspoiled nature is consciously joined by him with the one he surely harbors for ethical beauty and how far he is influenced by the Vergilian passage, which, in the original context, describes the sacredness, or better, the "numinous" character of a place – Capitol hill – still wild and lonely, but already marked by a mysterious holy aura, heralding its destiny

as the original seat of the eternal city. The philosopher often charges the poet's words with new meanings and uses them to express in a striking and effective way his own thought. We should also add that he expressly opposes the natural caves found in wild mountains to the artificial grottoes one could see in Roman gardens (*non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxitatem excavatus*). However, can we really state that Seneca anticipates the Romantics' taste and sensitivity?

We can compare the passage of our letter with one from Cicero's *De natura deorum*, which draws on Posidonius, or, according to Max Pohlenz<sup>5</sup>, on Panaetius. In this passage (*nat. deor.* 2.98) Cicero, while listing the beauties of the cosmos which are a proof of the presence of God, mentions, among other things, *speluncarum concavas altitudines, saxorum asperitates, impendentium montium altitudines, immensitatesque camporum* ("the deep hollow spaces of grottoes, the ruggedness of cliffs, the overhanging height of mountains, and the immensity of plains"). According to Cicero, even these wild places are an integral part of the *pulchritudo rerum earum quas divina providentia dicimus constitutas* ("of the beauty of what has been planned, as we say, by divine providence"), just as much as the pleasant sites and the things useful to men which God has placed in nature. In Seneca passages reminiscent of the spirit of this page of Cicero's are not lacking. In the *Consolatio ad Marciam* the whole of chapter 18 is devoted to a description of the cosmos, which is defined from the outset as a city common to men and gods (*Marc.* 18.2 *urbem dis hominibusque communem*, which repeats the traditional Stoic definition πόλις ἐκ θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων συνεστῶσα: *SVF* II 528). Here, as in Cicero's passage, we find a description of natural sights, including some details very close to Cicero's: *Marc.* 18.4 *hinc camporum in infinitum patentium fusa planities, hinc montium magnis et nivalibus surgentium iugis erecti in sublime vertexes* ("on the one side the immensity of plains, on the other the summits of mountains rising to heights crowned with snow"). But both in the passage from the *De natura deorum* and in the one from the *Consolatio ad Marciam* the traits describing wild nature are not alone, but are accompanied by several others which sketch a cosmos created by providence for men. Both descriptions remind of one which could be made by a pleased landowner listing the beauties to be found in his property, including those lacking in practical usefulness.

We shall not be wrong in concluding that Seneca, though receptive to the beauty of wild, uncontaminated nature, encloses it, nevertheless, within the

<sup>5</sup> M. Pohlenz, *La Stoa. Storia di un movimento spirituale*, Ital. transl., Firenze 1959, I, 398.

frame of a providential plan whose beneficiary is man<sup>6</sup>. Significantly, in the passage of the *Consolatio ad Marciam* we just quoted (18.5), he extols the beauty of cultivated fields with and before that of spontaneous vegetation (*adiuta cultu seges et arbusta sine cultore feritatis*); and his description culminates in the intervention of man on nature by means of the *artes*: *disces docebisque artes, alias quae vitam instruant, alias quae ornent, alias quae regant* (18.7: "you shall learn and teach the arts; some fulfill the needs of life, some make it pleasant, some direct it").

We can extract an even clearer message from a passage in the *De beneficiis*, where the providential character of nature is confirmed and in which its beauty cannot be separated from its usefulness to mankind. And perhaps it is possible here to infer Seneca's preference for those sights which, "innumerable, caress the eyes, the ears, the soul" (*ben. 4.5.1 haec innumabilia oculos, aures, animum mulcentia*). We should at least note that human activity is an integral part of this picture: agriculture on land, sailing on water. There is, however, a characteristic detail which connects this moved and moving description of the beauty and the usefulness of nature, conceived of as a benefit of God to men and as a field open to their activity, with the passage of epistle 41, where wild and unspoiled nature was prominent. In both cases Seneca describes natural beauty not directly, but through a literary intermediation, namely through his beloved Vergil. In epistle 41 it was Vergil's description of Capitol hill in its primeval state, where a divine presence was perceived; in the passage of the *De beneficiis* Seneca quotes the lines of the *Georgics* describing lake Como and lake Garda (*georg. 2.159-160*), and also those from *Eclogues* 1, in which Tityrus expresses his gratitude to the god who has allowed him to live peacefully on his land (*ecl. 1.6-10*). It would be wrong, however, to think that Seneca is able to feel and express the beauty of nature not directly, but only through the intermediation of literature. In reality, Vergil's poetic word, though providing him with an extremely effective expressive tool, receives a new semantic charge through the philosophical nuances it acquires by being assumed as an integral part of Seneca's philosophical discourse. The originality of our writer, as we have already remarked, is largely based on the fruitful convergence of his philosophical formation, which is Greek and Stoic, with his rhetorical and literary education, which is inevitably connected with the cultural milieu of contemporary Rome.

At this point we must go back to what we have stated at the beginning: as

<sup>6</sup> Seneca, however, does not share the somewhat petty conviction that everything in the universe was made for men. See A. Setaioli, *Seneca and the Divine. Stoic Tradition and Personal Developments*, "IJCT" 13, 2006-2007, 333-368.

a true Stoic, Seneca makes no distinction between aesthetical and ethical beauty, in as much as both are nothing but the manifestation of the Λόγος in the world. Only by remembering this shall we be able to comprehend his attitude before the spectacle of nature. Of this spectacle he cannot have his fill (*Helv.* 8.6), and often he just views it as though he were seeing it for the first time (*ep.* 64.5). Seneca believes that the unspoiled nature in which the first men lived was nobler and more beautiful than the luxurious homes of the rich of his own times. Looking at the starry sky he feels a shiver reminiscent of the *divina voluptas* experienced by Lucretius while contemplating the universe (*de rer. nat.* 3.28). In a page of the *Consolation* to his mother Seneca's tone rises above his usual: *Helv.* 8.2-6 (*in exilio*) *quantulum est quod perdimus! duo, quae pulcherrima sunt, quocumque nos moverimus sequentur... natura communis et propria virtus... Mundus hic, quo nihil neque maius neque ornatus rerum natura genuit, <et> animus, contemplator admiratorque mundi, pars eius magnificentissima, propria nobis et perpetua et tam diu nobiscum mansura sunt quamdiu ipsi manebimus... Proinde, dum oculi mei ab illo spectaculo, cuius insatiabiles sunt, non abducantur, dum mihi solem lunamque intueri liceat, dum ceteris inhaerere sideribus, dum ortus eorum occasusque et intervalla et causas investigare vel ocius meandi vel tardius, <dum> spectare tot per noctem stellas micantis et alias immobiles, alias non in magnum spatium exeuntes, sed intra suum se circumferentes vestigium, quasdam subito erumpentes, quasdam igne fuso praestringentes aciem, quasi decidant, vel longo tractu cum multa luce praetervolantes; dum cum his sim et caelestibus, qua homini fas est, immiscer, dum animum ad cognatarum rerum conspectum tendentem in sublimi semper habeam, quantum refert mea quid calcem?* ["how little and paltry are the things we lose (in exile)! The most beautiful two will follow us no matter where we go: I mean nature, which belongs to everybody, and our own virtue... This universe, the greatest and most beautiful thing created by nature, and the soul, which contemplates and admires it, actually its most magnificent part, are ours for ever and shall remain with us for all of our life... And so, as long as this spectacle, of which my eyes cannot have their fill, is not removed from them, as long as I'm able to see the sun and the moon and to follow the other celestial bodies, to watch their rising and their setting, to investigate their periodical appearances and the causes of the acceleration or the slowing of their motion, to observe so many shining stars in the night, some motionless, others moving in a short orbit which they never leave, others which appear suddenly, still others striking our eyes with a fire that spreads out, as though they were falling, or crossing the sky leaving a long track of light – as long as I am able to contemplate all this and stay in contact with heavenly realities as far as it is permitted to mortals, as long as I can keep

my soul up high in contemplation of the things related to it, what do I care what my feet trample?"].

This long quotation allows us to gain an exact comprehension of the nature of Seneca's emotion: the beauty he sees in the universe is the manifestation of divine reason unfolding itself in nature. The philosopher feels he is himself part of it: the stars and the heavenly phenomena are *cognatae res*, "related entities", for him; much more: his soul is the most magnificent part of the universe. It is apparent that Seneca's sentiments before nature stem from the same roots from which his rapture before the superhuman beauty of the soul of the *vir bonus* also stemmed: in both he perceives the mark of the Stoic divinity, which manifests itself, in turn, as nature, reason, or fate, according to the conception of Stoic monism. Therefore, by contemplating this beauty, one comes into contact with God. Similar passages are found elsewhere too in Seneca's writings.

So, in the preface to the first book of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, where several of these themes reappear, we can easily notice that the contemplation of nature is a perfect equivalent of the contemplation of God. Facing God, Seneca does not lose himself in mysticism, like the medieval ascetics; quite on the contrary, he experiences an increase to the utmost degree of his rational capabilities, which he turns towards the comprehension of the essence of the divine. He wants to "measure God" (§ 17 *mensus deum*), just like Dante in the last canto of his *Paradise: Par.* 33.133 ss.: "qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige / per misurar lo cerchio,... tal era io a quella vista nova" ["as the geometrician totally concentrates in measuring the circle,... such was I at that new sight (of God)"].

In a passage of the *De providentia* (*prov.* 1.2) Seneca, following a long tradition, mentions the order and the beauty of creation to prove that providence exists. This "cosmological proof" is undoubtedly directed to the reader. Seneca himself needs no proof, since he considers the contemplation of the cosmos as an equivalent of the direct contemplation of God.

In Seneca's view God is the ultimate artist – on this point he follows the ancient Greek conception of God bringing order to unorganized matter, thus making the universe into a κόσμος. The idea of διακόσμησις is crucial in Plato's *Timaeus* and was also taken up by Stoicism, according to which the cosmos is the work of a πῦρ τεχνικόν, literally an "artist fire", to be identified with God. Man has been created to admire this sight of unspeakable beauty: *De ot.* 5.3 *curiosum nobis natura ingenium dedit et, artis ac pulchritudinis suae conscia, spectatores nos tantis rerum spectaculis genuit, perditura fructum sui si tam magna, tam clara, tam subtiliter ducta, tam nitida et non uno genere formosa solitudini ostenderet* ("Curiosity in us is a gift from Nature; conscious of her own artistry and beauty, she created us to be the

viewers of this wonderful show; her labor would have been in vain if she had contrived her works, so great, so bright, so finely executed, so brilliant and so rich in different beauties, only to show them to a desert"). That's why nature has fashioned us upright and capable of raising our head towards the heavens. This is a widespread idea, which goes back to Chrysippus, and probably, beyond him, to Aristotle (cf. *Cic. nat. deor.* 2.37, with Pease's comments, pp. 629-631).

This is what gives rise to our desire for knowledge and scientific research, because, as Seneca states immediately after the words we have just quoted, what we see of nature is so beautiful that it makes us wish to apprehend even what does not fall under our eyes. Nature herself, that is God's visible manifestation, has equipped us with the impulse towards knowledge and the capability to attain it; man's duty is to cultivate and develop this impulse (*ep.* 120.4). This is the foundation of virtue (*ep.* 108.8; 94.29) and of every art (*ben.* 4.6.5-6). God himself has placed in our souls *tot artium semina* and he himself *ex occulto producit ingenia* (4.5.6), that is, he has sown in our souls the seeds of all arts and draws up genius from deep inside us. We should remember that already in the passage from the *De otio* which we have quoted Seneca mentioned the art of Nature: *artis et pulchritudinis suae conscia*. We should once more remark the Stoic turn Seneca gives to the traditional idea of art as imitation of nature, which he states again, as we have already seen, in epistle 65: *omnis ars naturae imitatio est* (*ep.* 65.3). We shall be able to grasp even better the meaning this idea acquires in Seneca if we compare these words with his definition of reason, in the following epistle: *quid est ratio? naturae imitatio* ("what is reason? The imitation of nature", *ep.* 66.39). So, art and reason are both "imitations of nature", in other words two ways of following the lead of the Λόγος pervading nature, which is one and the same with the Stoic God. Nor shall we be surprised when Seneca tells us that Nature herself works by following her own art, which in turn produces her beauty (*ot.* 5.3).

We must, however, be extremely careful in our interpretation of this idea of Seneca's. First of all, we should not forget that for the ancients the concept of "art" did not perfectly correspond to our own. *Ars* (τέχνη in Greek) had a semantic range far wider than our term "art"; basically it denoted a capability common to a number of men, but not to everybody; therefore, it included not merely the products of artists, but also those of artisans and scholars<sup>7</sup>. Here we shall of course consider only those *artes* which can be included in our idea of "fine arts", but it will be necessary to keep in mind

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. M. Rieser, *The Moral Basis of Seneca's Aesthetics*, in *Actas del Congreso internacional de Filosofía en conmemoración de Séneca*, Córdoba 1965-1966, II, 237-244.

that ancient categories do not exactly dovetail with ours in this area.

This is not the time and place to tackle the general problem of division and subdivision of the arts as conceived of in antiquity. Seneca has devoted a whole letter to this question: epistle 88 (cf. also *Marc.* 18.7). This is an extremely important text, to which I have devoted several pages in my book *Seneca e i Greci* (pp. 316-322), but here it is of interest only in as much as Seneca places philosophy at the summit of all arts, or rather considers it the only real art, epitomizing and including all the others. At present, what we should retain is that, according to Seneca, all arts owe their origin to God, who has sown the seeds of them in the human soul. This position, well in keeping with the Stoic immanentism followed by Seneca, allows our philosopher to proceed well beyond Plato's doctrine, whose conception of art was strongly influenced by his dualism opposing the world of nature in which we live to the intelligible, and in his view only "real", cosmos. To tell the truth, this happens in one single Senecan passage, which, however, appears to find an extremely interesting development in Seneca's ideas about an issue which is itself aesthetically relevant and was pivotal in ancient literary theory, namely imitation in literature.

In epistle 65 Seneca discusses the philosophical doctrine of causes by referring to Aristotle's example of the statue<sup>8</sup>, whose causes are the material it is made of, the artist who makes it, the shape it receives, and the purpose for which it is made. Besides these four Aristotelian causes, Seneca tells us, there is, according to Plato, a fifth one: the "idea", that is the model after which the statue, as well as everything else, was made. A similar concept appears in epistle 58, where the example is taken from a different art, namely painting (*ep.* 58.19-20; sculpture again appears in the next paragraph: 58.21). To these twin epistles I have devoted several pages in my book already quoted, *Seneca e i Greci* (pp. 126-140). At present, what is most interesting for us is a detail which we are going to illustrate. As he adds the mention of Platonic "ideas" to the four causes of Aristotle's example of the statue (cf. e.g. *Aristot. phys.* 2.3, 194 b 25), Seneca remarks: *ep.* 65.7 *nihil autem ad rem pertinet, utrum foris (artifex) habeat exemplar, ad quod referat oculos, an intus, quod ibi ipse concepit et posuit* ("it doesn't matter whether the artist finds the model to look at outside, or he has conceived and placed it within himself"). So the artist can extract the model which he will clothe with a material form from inside himself – in other words, his work can be creation, not mere imitation. The idea is already found in Cicero (*orator* 9), who states – probably following a commonplace – that when Phidias was

<sup>8</sup> For this reference to Aristotle see A. Setaioli, *Seneca e i Greci. Citazioni e traduzioni nelle opere filosofiche*, Bologna 1988, 160-164.

sculpting the famous statues of Zeus and Athena he had no external model, but *ipsius in mente insidebat species pulchritudinis eximia quaedam, quam intuens in eaque defixus ad illius similitudinem artem et manum dirigebat* (“in his mind dwelt a high vision of beauty and by viewing this he directed his art and his hand to reproduce it”). This is a far cry from Plato’s conception of art as “copy of a copy”. Similar ideas, however, are not lacking in the Platonism of Seneca’s age, as we can easily realize if we read, for example, an author like Albinos or Alkinoos (II century A.D.: cf. *didasc.* 9), whose work was clearly meant to be a summary of Plato’s doctrines and an introduction to Platonism.

We can observe something similar, as we have already hinted, in the way Seneca reverses the conception of literary imitation which prevailed in the rhetoric of his times. We do not have the time to sketch a complete picture of his attitude to this issue, which occupied a crucial place in ancient literary theory and criticism. I have devoted a good deal of space to it in another of my books: *Facundus Seneca* (pp. 197-215). Suffice it to say now that, moving from the traditional idea, which considered the writer a basically passive recipient of the stylistic and literary qualities of his models, Seneca goes as far as discovering in the relationship to the models a veritable process of a well active literary and cultural formation, which brings the writer to recreate in an original manner the material he receives from the models, and to proceed beyond them thanks to his own personal contribution. Naturally the stress is now not merely on stylistic qualities which must be acquired, but also, and predominantly, on a veritable cultural formation. Quite significantly, Seneca reverses a metaphor which was current in rhetoric at least since Isocrates and repeatedly appears in rhetorical handbooks. This metaphor compared the model to a signet or seal and the imitator to a wax tablet receiving its imprint. By contrast Seneca states, not once but twice, that it is the writer’s task to print the image of his own soul on the material which comes from the models (*ep.* 84.8; 115.1; cf. *Facundus Seneca*, pp. 210-211 for the Greek texts). Once more, we witness the fruitful interaction of Seneca’s philosophical and rhetorical culture.

We have said that this idea is not completely developed in the text of epistle 65. If the conception of art as the imitation of nature which appears there must be read in the Stoic sense we have mentioned rather than in accordance with the disparaging Platonic view of art as copy of a copy, it remains, nevertheless, that in the context of epistle 65 Seneca lists among the artist’s intentions money, glory, and religious piety (*ep.* 65.5), but not the disinterested fulfillment of artistic intent and ideal. But, as we shall presently see, there are more Senecan texts in which the latter is foremost.

The most famous supporter of the idea of art as an imitation of nature in

antiquity was no doubt Aristotle. But whereas Aristotle, though considering art as mimesis, imitation *par excellence*, restored it to its dignity by referring it to the universal, Plato, as we said, had lowered it to a copy of nature, which in turn is the copy of intelligible ideas. It must be added, however, that we can also detect a quite different approach in Plato, which led the great Athenian to formulate a theory of art – or at least of poetry – as divine possession.

A trace of the negative attitude to art, connected with the first of the two Platonic positions we have just mentioned, can be recognized in Seneca too, in spite of what we have been saying up to now. In a letter, while speaking of some animals, such as spiders weaving their cobwebs and bees building the honeycombs in the hive, he states that the art of men does not possess the marvelous regularity of this natural “art” which is born with the animal, with no need to be learned: *ep.* 121.23 *incertum est et inaequabile quicquid ars tradit: ex aequo venit quod natura distribuit*. Of course here Seneca is not speaking of our “fine arts”; we can recognize the more extensive conception of “art” held by the ancients; here Seneca is probably thinking of our “arts and crafts”. Still, it remains true that the *ars* of men can never hope to attain the “technical” perfection, so to speak, which appears in the works of nature.

Attitudes of hostility to art appear in some typically moralistic contexts. Fine arts such as painting and sculpture are attacked as instruments of luxury and corruption (*ep.* 16.8; 88.18). And Seneca declares his disagreement with Posidonius, according to whom the “arts” (here understood as crafts and technical inventions) have been invented by philosophers and wise men (*ep.* 90.7).

There's more: sometimes art finds an unsurmountable obstacle in matter, which is the cause of imperfection. This is true even in relation to the supreme artist, God, who, in his arrangement of the cosmos, could not change matter, which, by its resistance, brought about the seeming injustice of providence (*prov.* 5.9; cf. *nat. quaest.* 1 *praef.* 16). The origin of this idea is not Stoic, in as much as it supposes a dualism which cannot be reconciled with the Stoa's monism. Dante, which takes up this idea from Seneca, applies it to the Aristotelian pattern of form and matter, with which it is much more in keeping [*Par.* 1.127-129 “forma non s'accorda / molte fiata all'intenzion dell'arte, / perch'a risponder la materia è sorda” (“oftentimes form does not fulfill the intention of art, because matter is reluctant to answer”)]. I have treated this problem in a paper I have presented last year at several American universities, which has now appeared in print in the “International Journal of the Classical Tradition”<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. above, note 6.

A confirmation of the very likely assumption that in this Seneca is not being influenced directly by Plato but rather by the Platonism of his own time comes from a comparison with the eighth treatise of Plotinus's fifth *Ennead*, titled "On Intelligible Beauty" (Περὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ κάλλους). There, several elements we have found in Seneca reappear in a philosophically much more rigorous context. The central idea of this Plotinian treatise is that all beauty emanates from the divine Intellect (cf. also *enn.* 1.6 "On the Beautiful", Περὶ τοῦ καλοῦ), from which the universal Soul takes it to print it like a seal on perceptible objects. In human art the model is not material, but resides in the artist's soul; and for Plotinus too art faces matter's resistance; matter can only acquire beauty in as much as it yields to art<sup>10</sup>. Of course Plotinus, consistently with his ideas, refuses the traditional conception of art as the imitation of nature, which, as we saw, still appears in Seneca.

One can discuss at length, as indeed it has been the case, to determine whether the second of the two Platonic conceptions we have mentioned – the one which views art as divine possession – has or has not left any trace in Seneca, like the first one did. Actually, such traces exist and are easy to recognize; the issue is really to determine whether Seneca has or has not consciously accepted this doctrine. The texts which have been produced and discussed in this connection – first of all the final part of the *De tranquillitate animi* (esp. 17.10), which quotes a famous passage from Plato's *Phaedrus* stating that a poet retaining a sober mind vainly knocks at the Muses' door (Plat. *Phaedr.* 254a) – all concern a particular aesthetic activity, namely literature, which is also the area I have more especially investigated. For many years I have found myself on a position opposed to the one held by two scholars to whom I am linked by boundless admiration and brotherly friendship, namely Giancarlo Mazzoli and Mireille Armisen-Marchetti. Lately, however, our disagreement has been significantly reduced.

First of all I would like to emphasize that I never thought that Seneca did not know the treatise Περὶ ὕψους ("On Sublimity"), nor that there are no traces of irrationalist literary doctrines in his writings; rather, I have always maintained that he could not accept irrationality as a goal in itself without ceasing to be a Stoic. Recently Mazzoli himself has acknowledged that in Seneca irrationality, or *mota mens*, is to be equated with a therapeutical shock aimed at recovering what at first sight might appear to be its exact opposite, that is *bona mens*, which is the way rationality manifests itself; and I have declared myself ready to agree on this point. From the very beginning,

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. E. De Keyser, *La signification de l'art dans les Ennéades de Plotin*, 1955, 39 ff.

however, I have found on my side such a great scholar as Alfonso Traina, who, among his many other merits, has made decisive contributions to Senecan scholarship. Down to his latest paper, in the "Festschrift" published for my retirement, he states his agreement with me on this problem<sup>11</sup>. It is hardly worthwhile continuing an already too long discussion.

To go back to the question previously raised, we shall stress once more that the idea that art has its own purpose in itself with no further and non-disinterested ends, is not foreign to Seneca. It is also interesting that, as we shall presently see, he formulates this idea also referring to other authorities. In the *De beneficiis* (2.33.2), while maintaining that a benefit is perfectly accomplished even if the recipient does not return it, Seneca resorts to the example of Phidias, who *perfecit opus suum, etiam si non vendidit* ("has accomplished his work, even if he was not able to sell it"). From the purely artistic point of view, the artist's success is measured by the carrying out of his artistic project (*fecisse quod voluit*): glory and material advantages are only accessory. The artist's reward is art itself. Interestingly enough, in this text Seneca establishes a distinction between *ars* and *artificium*; the latter no doubt denotes the craft or trade, whereas *ars*, this time, does correspond to what we mean by "art": *ben. 2.33.2 alius est fructus artis, alius artificii: artis est fecisse quod voluit, artificii fecisse cum fructu; perfecit opus suum Phidias, etiam si non vendidit. Triplex illi fructus est operis sui: unus conscientiae; hunc absoluto opere percipit; alter famae; tertius utilitatis, quem adlatura est aut gratia aut venditio aut aliqua commoditas* ["the fruit of art and the fruit of trade (*artificii*) are different: the fruit of art consists in having carried out what the artist intended, the fruit of trade in having done so in a 'fruitful' way; the work of Phidias is accomplished, even if he was not able to sell it. He gets a triple profit from his work: in the first place the consciousness of having succeeded, which stems from the accomplishment of the work; secondly, glory; in the third place an advantage which may come from somebody's favor, the selling of the work, or any other benefit"]. We should however notice that Seneca is not actually speaking of the essence and nature of art, but rather of the "satisfaction" (*fructus*) which the artist gets out of it. And this very term – *fructus* – is rather ambiguously referred both to *ars* and to *artificium*: the ambiguity is clearly apparent when Seneca tells us that the *fructus* of *artificium* is *fecisse cum fructu*, a formula which repeats in the explanation the term to be explained, though in a clearly material meaning; it remains that the *fructus* of *ars* consists simply in *fecisse*

<sup>11</sup> A. Traina, *Observatio sui. Sul linguaggio dell'interiorità nel De tranquillitate animi di Seneca*, in *Concentus ex dissonis. Scritti in onore di Aldo Setaioli*, Napoli 2006, II, 740.

*quod voluit*, that is in carrying out the artistic intention or project. Clearly, in this context *fructus* means in turn both artistic satisfaction and economic profit.

It is nevertheless remarkable that Seneca has made a clear distinction between disinterested art on the one hand and craft or trade on the other – the latter’s goal being profit. In the same way, in the *Naturales quaestiones* (4a praef. 14) Lucilius is praised for devoting himself to poetry, which is something *gratuitum*, that is, totally disinterested. Possibly the traditional aristocratic conception of the “liberal arts” as opposed to the practical and self-interested βάνανσοι τέχναι is still at work here. Seneca retains this distinction even in epistle 88, where he strives to provide a new philosophical foundation to the concept of “liberal arts”. As a matter of fact this letter begins with a blunt and very traditional statement: *nullum in bonis numero quod ad aes exit* (“I do not count among good things anything which boils down to money”); and of course everything we would consider “fine arts” is included in this class. But, quite differently from epistle 88, our text from the *De beneficiis* establishes a clear distinction between disinterested art on the one hand and craft or trade bent on profit on the other.

If the artist’s reward is art itself, it follows that the most gratifying moment for him is the time he spends fashioning his work. In Seneca this idea is formulated very seriously, with no trace of the humor we find in Catullus (22.15-17) or Horace (*epist.* 2.2.107) when they portray the satisfaction even mean poets get out of their poetic activity. Seneca refers to his former teacher Attalus, who had said that the process of making a friend provides more satisfaction than already having one, “just like”, he went on, “for the artist painting is more agreeable than having painted” (*ep.* 9.7 *quomodo artificii iucundius pingere est quam pinxisse*). Seneca comments on this by stating that, once he has achieved his work, the artist enjoys only the “product” – *fructus* – of his art (here we have a third meaning of the term *fructus* as applied to the area of art), whereas in the progress of his activity he enjoyed art itself: *ep.* 9.7 *iam fructu artis suae fruitur: ipsa fruebatur arte cum pingere*. So the power of art reveals itself mainly during artistic activity – we cannot speak of totally autonomous creation, since in the context art is put on a par with two other activities (making a friend and raising a child) which, though more agreeable in themselves than the goal they strive to attain, are nevertheless understood as a preparation to that goal, and therefore suppose an eminently practical end. We should rather note that Seneca places himself from the point of view of the artist; this is no doubt a sign of his pre-eminent interest for the human factor, that is for the ethical and practical side, rather than for abstract problems. Art is not considered in itself, in its essence and nature, nor as an object of contemplation for the public, but in relation to the

human subject: the artist.

The same is true for another interesting text, though the value of art in and for itself is stressed more clearly than in other Senecan passages. We should emphasize that, just like in the previous instance Seneca referred to his former teacher Attalus, here he reports the thought of an unknown, though with explicit approval. In epistle 7 (*ep.* 7.10-11) he quotes three sayings which reflect the aristocratic conception of art (and knowledge) as an ideal accessible only to a small number of connoisseurs or as a difficult conquest meant just for a small elite. This is an idea appearing in philosophy ever since the pre-Socratics and, in literature, from Hellenism onwards – at Rome starting with the *poetae novi*. The second of these sayings effectively expresses the idea that art is a value in itself; it is reported as the reply of an artist to those who asked why he was so careful in fashioning works which very few people would get to know: *satis sunt mihi pauci, satis est unus, satis est nullus* (*ep.* 7.11: “I am content with few, I am content with one, I am content with no one”). The rhetorical figure of *anticlimax* marking the literary form of this sentence should not lead us to think that it does not express a sincere conviction. As felicitously observed by Alfonso Traina, in Seneca thought becomes style. We can therefore conclude that his statement that art has no need for admirers is tantamount to proclaiming that it is itself an absolute value.

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