

THINKERING EXISTENZ BY WAY OF SENECA'S "ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE" AND SOME POETIC FICITION

So how about this Part 2?

Thank you for joining me again in this re-booting of *Call Me Maggie*. First, a big shout-out to all my friends showing support on Patreon. I have a few private mediations I will be sharing this week just for y'all. But first...

We continue onward, as promised, with some correlations I have found over the last two decades between Seneca's Stoicism and that current of contemporary thinkering called Philosophy of Existence, or *Existenzphilosophie*. The latter really gets underway with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche with their more formal philosophizing and with Walt Whitman and Fyodor Dostoevsky in what I like to think of as philosophic poetics. I have long maintained, since being executive director of the North Texas Heidegger Symposium, that the poetry of Whitman is at least proto-existential, esp. such original texts as "Poems of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth" (which was broken up into smaller poems in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*). I have already recorded some thinkering on Whitman, Rainer Maria Rilke, and W. B. Yeats which I may present before the third installment of this series on Seneca. I will let folks know pretty soon.

Anyway, for today, I return to Seneca but as you might guess from my special pleading for Whitman, I am going to offer some comparisons of the old Roman Stoic with a few of my favorite authors who are at least leaning toward pondering the meaning of existence. I will also offer some—hopefully humble—comparisons/contrasts to my own contemplative poetics from *PLAYFUL NOWHERES*, a small book that gathered up things I did not want to use in my dissertation.

Who was Seneca again?

Seneca, born approximately 4 BCE in Corduba—present-day Cordoba, Spain—within the Roman Empire's Iberian colonies. R in Rome, Seneca rose to prominence as a noted Stoic philosopher, statesman, and playwright. During the last half of his life, he had a complex relationship with

the Principate—the family of Augustus Caesar who held the reins of imperial power. His closest tie to the Julio-Claudian rulers was the adopted son of Claudius, third successor of Augustus, who history would know as the narcissistic Nero. Seneca began as the boy's tutor and was a close advisor in the early years of his rule as First Citizen. Unfortunately, as often happened among Caesar's descendants, being close to their power came with the danger of being falsely accused. In 65 CE, Nero deemed Seneca guilty of conspiracy and forced his teacher's suicide. It was a rather gruesome affair actually.

Over time, Seneca's works, collected and copied, became inspirations for later thinkers such as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine.

Quick Overview

So, remember again that we are talking about a period steeped in Stoic philosophy, or the philosophy of the Porch (the STOA), the outdoor roofed colonnades around public buildings where many of this school not only taught, but often lived. Seneca's *DE BREVI TATE VITAE*, or "On the Shortness of Life," offers an enduring reflection on how very significant time must be for a living creature with only a limited amount of time.

The core point that Seneca wishes to drive home: Critical reflection on your own life and how you see others living reveals a simple truth: There is an authentic use of one's life—and it is not the busyness one often here's about. In fact, Seneca proposes something at which most everyday 21st Century folks would wonder: Life is not inherently brief, running out before we really have a chance to live. Rather, the fast-paced distractions and social obligations that make up so much of our activity actually misappropriate the majority of our time, handing it over for the benefit of others and to the detriment of ourselves.

Now, let us get back to the task, keeping in mind that our comparisons and contrasts this week will be with authors of poetry and fiction.

Chapter 6

Text by Seneca

When Livius Drusus, a bold and energetic man, had with the support of a huge crowd drawn from all Italy proposed new laws and the evil measures of the Gracchi, seeing no way out for his policy, which he could neither carry through nor abandon when once started on, he is said to have complained bitterly against the life of unrest he had had from the cradle, and to have exclaimed that he was the only person who had never had a holiday even as a boy. For, while he

was still a ward and wearing the dress of a boy, he had had the courage to commend to the favour of a jury those who were accused, and to make his influence felt in the lawcourts, so powerfully, indeed, that it is very well known that in certain trials he forced a favourable verdict.

To what lengths was not such premature ambition destined to go? One might have known that such precocious hardihood would result in great personal and public misfortune. And so it was too late for him to complain that he had never had a holiday when from boyhood he had been a trouble-maker and a nuisance in the forum. It is a question whether he died by his own hand; for he fell from a sudden wound received in his groin, some doubting whether his death was voluntary, no one, whether it was timely.

It would be superfluous to mention more who, though others deemed them the happiest of men, have expressed their loathing for every act of their years, and with their own lips have given true testimony against themselves; but by these complaints they changed neither themselves nor others. For when they have vented their feelings in words, they fall back into their usual round.

Heaven knows! such lives as yours, though they should pass the limit of a thousand years, will shrink into the merest span; your vices will swallow up any amount of time. The space you have, which reason can prolong, although it naturally hurries away, of necessity escapes from you quickly; for you do not seize it, you neither hold it back, nor impose delay upon the swiftest thing in the world, but you allow it to slip away as if it were something superfluous and that could be replaced.

Analysis by Maggie:

- 1) Main Thesis: The passage reflects on the futility of a life consumed by unceasing ambition and the neglect of self-awareness and personal peace. Seneca uses the example of Livius Drusus to illustrate how relentless pursuit of public and political goals, starting from a young age, can lead to a life devoid of personal fulfillment and tranquility.
- 2) Important Points:
 - a) **Ambition and Its Consequences**: Seneca highlights the dangers of precocious ambition, as seen in the life of Livius Drusus. This premature drive for power and influence, starting from boyhood, is portrayed as leading to personal and public misfortune. Seneca suggests that such ambition is unsustainable and can have detrimental effects on one's life.
 - b) **The Illusion of Fulfillment in Public Life**: The passage also touches on the theme of perceived happiness versus actual fulfillment. Seneca points out that individuals who are deemed successful and happy by others often loathe their own lives. This discrepancy underscores the emptiness of a life focused solely on external achievements and societal recognition.

3) Comparison with Walt Whitman's Poetry:

- a) **Quick Note:** *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's groundbreaking contribution to American literature, celebrates individuality, democracy, and the human spirit. The collection of poems breaks from traditional poetic forms and subjects, embracing a free verse style that mirrors the natural rhythms of speech and a panoramic view of American life and landscape. Central themes reflect Whitman's vision of a democratic and inclusive America, among these are the sanctity of the self, the beauty of the natural world, and the inherent equality of all people.
- b) **Value of the Individual:** Both Seneca and Whitman emphasize the importance of the individual. While Seneca focuses on the internal peace and self-awareness of the individual, Whitman celebrates the individual's unique experience and potential in works like "Leaves of Grass."
- c) **Critique of Societal Expectations:** Both writers' critiques concern societal expectations. Seneca criticizes the relentless pursuit of public life at the expense of personal peace, while Whitman challenges societal norms and conventions, advocating for a more natural and free expression of the self.

4) Contrast with Walt Whitman:

- a) **Approach to Life and Ambition:** Seneca warns against the dangers of unchecked ambition and a life devoid of personal fulfillment, advocating for a more introspective and balanced life. Whitman, on the other hand, encourages embracing life with enthusiasm and vigor, celebrating the self and its capabilities in a more positive and expansive manner.
- b) **Concept of Time and Experience:** Seneca views time as something that can be consumed by vices and wasted in pursuit of hollow ambitions. Whitman, conversely, sees time as a canvas for the rich tapestry of experiences, urging individuals to seize the day and live fully in each moment.

5) Comparison with *Playful Nowheres*:

- a) **Quick Note:** In case you never actually perused my little collection of aphorisms and short meditations, *Playful Nowheres* engages the playfulness of tinkering by addressing issues of queer identity and societal norms. As with my dissertation, this text critiques—though a bit more poetically—the oppressive binaries at the heart of Western thinking to advocate for a richer understanding of diversity beyond pseudo-dualisms. This was the first place I teased the notion of dyads—mutually constituting extremes that modern Western thought often splits into clear, distinct contradictions. My poetics intertwine with philosophical inquiries into the nature of knowledge, power, and custom, to suggest that established norms are not necessarily natural but are socio-cultural narratives pre-fabricating our understanding of the world.

- b) **The Pursuit of Meaning and Self-Actualization:** In Seneca's passage, the focus is on the futility of a life consumed by unceasing ambition and external achievements, suggesting a need for introspection and personal peace. In "Playful Nowhere," particularly in sections like "Shadow march," there is an exploration of the search for meaningfulness on the margins, suggesting a similar introspection and critique of societal norms. Both texts emphasize the importance of finding personal meaning beyond societal expectations.
 - c) **The Concept of Time and Life's Fulfillment:** Seneca discusses how vices and relentless ambition can consume one's life, making even a long life feel short and unfulfilled. In *Playful Nowhere*—in sections like "Stalking the boundary" and "Unnecessary custom"—there is an exploration of how societal customs and norms can be restrictive and not necessarily essential for personal fulfillment. Both works suggest that true fulfillment comes from an understanding and critique of these societal structures and a more personal, introspective approach to life.
- 6) Contrast with Playful Nowheres:
- a) **Approach to Life's Challenges:** While Seneca's text warns against the dangers of unchecked ambition and advocates for a balanced life, *Playful Nowheres* seems to embrace the complexities and challenges of life, particularly along the margins, as a source of meaning and self-actualization. This contrast highlights different approaches to dealing with life's challenges and the pursuit of fulfillment.
- 7) Quick summary: While both Seneca and Whitman value the individual and question societal norms, their approaches to life, ambition, and the use of time present a stark contrast. Seneca advocates for moderation and introspection, whereas Whitman encourages a full, robust embrace of life's possibilities. Also, both Seneca and I delve into themes of life's meaning, the pursuit of personal fulfillment, and the critique of societal norms. However, while the ancient Stoic emphasizes the need for balance and introspection to avoid a life of unfulfillment, this contemporary existentialist explores the richness and complexity of life at the margins of society as a meaningful source for authentic self-actualization. I also work this theme out in my dissertation to a much more profound degree.

Chapter 7

Text by Seneca

But among the worst I count also those who have time for nothing but wine and lust; for none have more shameful engrossments.¹ The others, even if they are possessed by the empty dream of glory, nevertheless go astray in a seemingly manner; though you should cite to me the men who are avaricious, the men who are wrathful, whether busied with unjust hatreds or with unjust wars, these all sin in more manly fashion. But those who are plunged into the pleasures of the belly and into lust bear a stain that is dishonorable.

Search into the hours of all these people,² see how much time they give to accounts, how much to laying snares, how much to fearing them, how much to paying court, how much to being courted, how much is taken up in giving or receiving bail, how much by banquets—for even these have now become a matter of business—, and you will see how their interests, whether you call them evil or good, do not allow them time to breathe. Finally, everybody agrees that no one pursuit can be successfully followed by a man who is busied with many things—eloquence cannot, nor the liberal studies—since the mind, when its interests are divided, takes in nothing very deeply, but rejects everything that is, as it were, crammed into it. There is nothing the busy man is less busied with than living: there is nothing that is harder to learn. Of the other arts there are many teachers everywhere; some of them we have seen that mere boys have mastered so thoroughly that they could even play the master. It takes the whole of life to learn how to live, and—what will perhaps make you wonder more—it takes the whole of life to learn how to die

Many very great men, having laid aside all their encumbrances, having renounced riches, business, and pleasures, have made it their one aim up to the very end of life to know how to live; yet the greater number of them have departed from life confessing that they did not yet know—still less do those others know.

Believe me, it takes a great man and one who has risen far above human weaknesses not to allow any of his time to be filched from him, and it follows that the life of such a man is very long because he has devoted wholly to himself whatever time he has had. None of it lay neglected and idle; none of it was under the control of another, for, guarding it most grudgingly, he found

¹ Throughout the essay *occupati*, “the engrossed,” is a technical term designating those who are so absorbed in the interests of life that they take no time for philosophy.

² i.e., the various types of *occupati* that have been sketchily presented. The looseness of the structure has led some editors to doubt the integrity of the passage.

nothing that was worthy to be taken in exchange for his time. And so that man had time enough, but those who have been robbed of much of their life by the public, have necessarily had too little of it.

And there is no reason for you to suppose that these people are not sometimes aware of their loss. Indeed, you will hear many of those who are burdened by great prosperity cry out at times in the midst of their throngs of clients, or their pleadings in court, or their other glorious miseries: “I have no chance to live.”

Of course, you have no chance! All those who summon you to themselves, turn you away from your own self. Of how many days has that defendant robbed you? Of how many that candidate? Of how many that old woman wearied with burying her heirs?³ Of how many that man who is shamming sickness for the purpose of exciting the greed of the legacy-hunters? Of how many that very powerful friend who has you and your like on the list, not of his friends, but of his retinue? Check off, I say, and review the days of your life; you will see that very few, and those the refuse, have been left for you.

That man who had prayed for the fasces,⁴ when he attains them, desires to lay them aside and says over and over: “When will this year be over!” That man gives games,⁵ and, after setting great value on gaining the chance to give them, now says: “When shall I be rid of them?” That advocate is lionized throughout the whole forum, and fills all the place with a great crowd that stretches farther than he can be heard, yet he says: “When will vacation time come?” Everyone hurries his life on and suffers from a yearning for the future and a weariness of the present. But he who bestows all of his time on his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the morrow. For what new pleasure is there that any hour can now bring? They are all known, all have been enjoyed to the full. Mistress Fortune may deal out the rest as she likes; his life has already found safety. Something may be added to it, but nothing taken from it, and he will take any addition as the man who is satisfied and filled takes the food which he does not desire and yet can hold.

And so there is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkles; he has not lived long—he has existed long. For what if you should think that that man had had a long voyage who had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbour,

³ i.e., she has become the prey of legacy-hunters.

⁴ The rods that were the symbol of high office.

⁵ At this time the management of the public games was committed to the praetors.

and, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, had been driven in a circle around the same course?

Not much voyaging did he have, but much tossing about.

Analysis by Maggie

- 1) Main Thesis: The chapter emphasizes the detrimental effects of indulging in vices, particularly those of wine and lust, which Seneca considers among the worst. He argues that these indulgences not only dishonor one's character but also consume valuable time that could be used for more meaningful pursuits.
- 2) Important Points:
 - a) **Critique of Pleasure-Seeking**: Seneca criticizes those who spend their time in pursuit of base pleasures, arguing that this leads to a life that is not truly lived. He contrasts this with the lives of those who seek glory or engage in other vices, suggesting that even these pursuits, though misguided, are more honorable than a life spent in hedonistic indulgence.
 - b) **The Value of Philosophy**: Seneca posits that the study and practice of philosophy are essential for a truly meaningful life. He argues that philosophy allows individuals to transcend the limitations of their time and connect with the wisdom of the ages, thereby leading a life that is both fuller and more profound.
- 3) Comparison with Rainer Maria Rilke's Corpus:
 - a) **Quick Note**: Rilke's poetry and fiction are celebrated for their profound exploration of existential themes, including the solitude of the human condition, the search for meaning, and the relationship between life and art. His works, characterized by intense introspection and lyrical beauty, often delve into the complexities of love, death, and the transient nature of existence. Rilke's writings, particularly in collections like "Duino Elegies" and "Sonnets to Orpheus," are significant for their philosophical depth and their ability to articulate the ineffable aspects of human experience, making him a pivotal figure in both modernist literature and existential thought.
 - b) **Approach to Life and Pleasure**: Rilke's poetry often explores the depth and complexity of human emotions and experiences, including pleasure and desire. Unlike Seneca, who views such pursuits critically, Rilke tends to embrace the full spectrum of human experience as a source of poetic inspiration and personal growth.
 - c) **Philosophical Inquiry**: Both Seneca and Rilke engage deeply with philosophical themes. However, while Seneca's philosophy is more prescriptive, advocating a specific way of life, Rilke's work is more exploratory, delving into existential questions and the human condition without necessarily prescribing answers.

- 4) Comparison with Maggie's *Playful Nowhere*:
 - a) **Embracing Life's Experiences**: Similar to Rilke, "Playful Nowhere" embraces a wide range of life experiences, including those on the margins, as valuable for personal growth and self-actualization, contrasting with Seneca's more critical view of pleasure-seeking.
 - b) **Philosophical Exploration**: Both "Playful Nowhere" and Seneca's work emphasize the importance of philosophical thought. However, while Seneca advocates for philosophy as a means to transcend the mundane, "Playful Nowhere" uses philosophical thought to delve deeper into the complexities of existence, particularly in the context of marginalized identities.
- 5) Quick Summary: While Seneca's Chapter 7 focuses on the critique of hedonistic pursuits and the value of philosophy for a meaningful life, Rilke's poetry and my own *Playful Nowheres* tend to embrace a broader spectrum of human experiences and delve into philosophical inquiries in a more exploratory and less prescriptive manner.

Chap 8

Text by Seneca

I am often filled with wonder when I see some men demanding the time of others and those from whom they ask it most indulgent. Both of them fix their eyes on the object of the request for time, neither of them on the time itself; just as if what is asked were nothing, what is given, nothing. Men trifle with the most precious thing in the world; but they are blind to it because it is an incorporeal thing, because it does not come beneath the sight of the eyes, and for this reason it is counted a very cheap thing—nay, of almost no value at all. Men set very great store by pensions and doles, and for these they hire out their labour or service or effort. But no one sets a value on time; all use it lavishly as if it cost nothing. But see how these same people clasp the knees of physicians if they fall ill and the danger of death draws nearer, see how ready they are, if threatened with capital punishment, to spend all their possessions in order to live! So great is the inconsistency of their feelings.

But if each one could have the number of his future years set before him as is possible in the case of the years that have passed, how alarmed those would be who saw only a few remaining, how sparing of them would they be! And yet it is easy to dispense an amount that is assured, no matter how small it may be; but that must be guarded more carefully which will fail you know not when.

Yet there is no reason for you to suppose that these people do not know how precious a thing time is; for to those whom they love most devotedly they have a habit of saying that they are ready to give them a part of their own years. And they do give it, without realizing it; but the

result of their giving is that they themselves suffer loss without adding to the years of their dear ones. But the very thing they do not know is whether they are suffering loss; therefore, the removal of something that is lost without being noticed they find is bearable.

Yet no one will bring back the years, no one will bestow you once more on yourself. Life will follow the path it started upon, and will neither reverse nor check its course; it will make no noise, it will not remind you of its swiftness. Silent it will glide on; it will not prolong itself at the command of a king, or at the applause of the populace. Just as it was started on its first day, so it will run; nowhere will it turn aside, nowhere will it delay. And what will be the result? You have been engrossed, life hastens by; meanwhile death will be at hand, for which, willy nilly, you must find leisure.

Analysis by Maggie

- 1) Main Thesis: The chapter focuses on the value of time and the importance of using it wisely. Seneca argues that people often do not realize how precious time is and tend to waste it on trivial pursuits, not understanding that it is the most valuable resource they have.
- 2) Important Points:
 - a) **Time is More Valuable Than Material Wealth**: Seneca emphasizes that time, unlike material wealth, is a resource that, once lost, cannot be regained. He criticizes those who are willing to give away their time freely to others or waste it, without realizing its true value.
 - b) **The Irony of Planning for the Future**: He points out the irony in people spending their lives planning for a future that is uncertain, while neglecting the present. This behavior leads to a life that is essentially unfulfilled and constantly deferred.
- 3) Contrast with André Gide's *The Immoralist*:
 - a) **Quick note**: If you have never read *The Immoralist*, Gide tells the story of Michel, a scholarly and reserved man who, after a near-death experience due to tuberculosis, undergoes a profound personal transformation. The novel explores themes of self-discovery and the conflict between societal norms and personal desires, as Michel increasingly indulges in hedonistic pleasures and rejects conventional morality. This journey leads him to question the very foundations of his previous life, including his marriage, his academic pursuits, and his social responsibilities, ultimately challenging the reader to consider the nature and limits of personal freedom.
 - b) **Approach to Life and Pleasure**: *The Immoralist* explores the life of a man who indulges in sensual pleasures and rejects conventional morality, which contrasts sharply with Seneca's advocacy for a disciplined life focused on philosophical wisdom.

- c) **Value of Time and Experience:** While Seneca emphasizes the wise use of time for philosophical pursuits, Gide's protagonist seeks personal liberation through the exploration of desires and pleasures, often at the expense of conventional uses of time.
- 4) Comparison with *Playful Nowheres*:
- a) **Exploration of Existence:** Both *Playful Nowheres* and *The Immoralist* explore the depths of human experience, but while Gide's work focuses on the liberation through sensual experiences, my own poetics delves into a broader spectrum of existential exploration, including marginalized experiences.
- b) **Philosophical Inquiry and Use of Time:** Similar to Seneca *Playful Nowheres* engages in philosophical inquiry, but rather than prescribing a specific use of time, it appears to embrace a more diverse and inclusive approach to understanding and experiencing life.
- 5) Quick Summary: While Seneca's Chapter 8 emphasizes the wise use of time and the folly of neglecting the present for future gains, *The Immoralist* and *Playful Nowheres* present contrasting perspectives on the exploration of human experience and the use of time, with *Playful Nowheres* offering a more inclusive and diverse existential exploration compared to the other two.

Chap 9

Text by Seneca

Can anything be sillier than the point of view of certain people I mean those who boast of their foresight? They keep themselves very busily engaged in order that they may be able to live better; they spend life in making ready to live! They form their purposes with a view to the distant future; yet postponement is the greatest waste of life; it deprives them of each day as it comes, it snatches from them the present by promising something hereafter. The greatest hindrance to living is expectancy, which depends upon the morrow and wastes to-day. You dispose of that which lies in the hands of Fortune, you let go that which lies in your own. Whither do you look? At what goal do you aim? All things that are still to come lie in uncertainty; live straightway!

See how the greatest of bards cries out, and, as if inspired with divine utterance, sings the saving strain:

The fairest day in hapless mortals' life
Is ever first to flee.⁶

⁶ Virgil, *Georgics*, iii. 66 sq.

“Why do you delay,” says he, “Why are you idle? Unless you seize the day, it flees.” Even though you seize it, it still will flee; therefore you must vie with time’s swiftness in the speed of using it, and, as from a torrent that rushes by and will not always flow, you must drink quickly. And, too, the utterance of the bard is most admirably worded to cast censure upon infinite delay, in that he says, not “the fairest age,” but “the fairest day.” Why, to whatever length your greed inclines, do you stretch before yourself months and years in long array, unconcerned and slow though time flies so fast?

The poet speaks to you about the day, and about this very day that is flying. Is there, then, any doubt that for hapless mortals, that is, for men who are engrossed, the fairest day is ever the first to flee? Old age surprises them while their minds are still childish, and they come to it unprepared and unarmed, for they have made no provision for it; they have stumbled upon it suddenly and unexpectedly, they did not notice that it was drawing nearer day by day.

Even as conversation or reading or deep meditation on some subject beguiles the traveller, and he finds that he has reached the end of his journey before he was aware that he was approaching it, just so with this unceasing and most swift journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether waking or sleeping; those who are engrossed become aware of it only at the end.

Analysis by Maggie

- 1) Main Thesis: The chapter emphasizes the importance of living a life of philosophical contemplation and virtue, suggesting that such a life leads to a form of immortality through the enduring impact of one's actions and thoughts.
- 2) Important Points:
 - a) **Transience of Material Achievements**: Seneca highlights the fleeting nature of material achievements and honors, contrasting them with the lasting value of philosophical wisdom and virtuous living.
 - b) **Time as a Resource for Philosophical Living**: He argues that time, when used wisely for philosophical pursuits, can extend one's life in a meaningful way, transcending the limitations of physical existence.
- 3) Contrast with Emily Dickinson's Poetry:
 - a) **Focus on the Inner Life**: Dickinson's poetry often delves into themes of mortality, the inner self, and the mysteries of existence, similar to Seneca's focus on the inner life and philosophical contemplation.
 - b) **Exploration of Death and Immortality**: While Seneca views philosophical living as a path to immortality, Dickinson's work frequently explores death and the afterlife, often with a sense of mystery and ambiguity.

- 4) Comparison with *Playful Nowheres*:
- a) **Existential Exploration**: Both Seneca's work and "Playful Nowheres" emphasize the importance of a deeper understanding of life and existence, though "Playful Nowheres" approaches this through a blend of poetry and philosophy, offering a more diverse and inclusive perspective.
 - b) **Use of Time and Life's Purpose**: Similar to Seneca's emphasis on the wise use of time, "Playful Nowheres" seems to explore the concept of time and existence, but with a focus on marginalized experiences and a broader existential inquiry.
- 5) Quick Summary: As we have seen again and again in Seneca, Chapter 9 promotes a life of philosophical virtue as a means to achieve a form of immortality. I would like to think that Emily Dickinson's poetry which was inspiration on my own *Playful Nowheres* offers a more nuanced exploration of life, death, and the existential aspects of human experience. My collected aphorisms and meditations provide an intersection of poetry and philosophy that hopefully engage those nuances. I do hope all of this shameless self-promotion will get a few folks to read it.

Chap 10

Text by Seneca

Should I choose to divide my subject into heads with their separate proofs, many arguments will occur to me by which I could prove that busy men find life very short. But Fabianus,⁷ who was none of your lecture-room philosophers of to-day, but one of the genuine and old-fashioned kind, used to say that we must fight against the passions with main force, not with artifice, and that the battle-line must be turned by a bold attack, not by inflicting pinpricks; that sophistry is not serviceable, for the passions must be, not nipped, but crushed. Yet, in order that the victims of them may be censured, each for his own particular fault, I say that they must be instructed, not merely wept over.

Life is divided into three periods—that which has been, that which is, that which will be. Of these the present time is short, the future is doubtful, the past is certain. For the last is the one over which Fortune has lost control, is the one which cannot be brought back under any man's power. But men who are engrossed lose this; for they have no time to look back upon the past, and even if they should have, it is not pleasant to recall something they must view with regret.

⁷ 18 A much admired teacher of Seneca.

They are, therefore, unwilling to direct their thoughts backward to illspent hours, and those whose vices become obvious if they review the past, even the vices which were disguised under some allurements of momentary pleasure, do not have the courage to revert to those hours. No one willingly turns his thought back to the past, unless all his acts have been submitted to the censorship of his conscience, which is never deceived; he who has ambitiously coveted, proudly scorned, recklessly conquered, treacherously betrayed, greedily seized, or lavishly squandered, must needs fear his own memory.

And yet this is the part of our time that is sacred and set apart, put beyond the reach of all human mishaps, and removed from the dominion of Fortune, the part which is disquieted by no want, by no fear, by no attacks of disease; this can neither be troubled nor be snatched away—it is an everlasting and unanxious possession. The present offers only one day at a time, and each by minutes; but all the days of past time will appear when you bid them, they will suffer you to behold them and keep them at your will—a thing which those who are engrossed have no time to do.

The mind that is untroubled and tranquil has the power to roam into all the parts of its life; but the minds of the engrossed, just as if weighted by a yoke, cannot turn and look behind. And so their life vanishes into an abyss; and as it does no good, no matter how much water you pour into a vessel, if there is no bottom⁸ to receive and hold it, so with time—it makes no difference how much is given; if there is nothing for it to settle upon, it passes out through the chinks and holes of the mind.

Present time is very brief, so brief, indeed, that to some there seems to be none; for it is always in motion, it ever flows and hurries on; it ceases to be before it has come, and can no more brook delay than the firmament or the stars, whose ever unrelenting movement never lets them abide in the same track. The engrossed, therefore, are concerned with present time alone, and it is so brief that it cannot be grasped, and even this is filched away from them, distracted as they are among many things.

Analysis by Maggie

- 1) Main Thesis: Seneca argues that the past is the only part of our lives over which fortune has no control and that reflecting on it can provide a sense of permanence and tranquility, unlike the fleeting present or uncertain future.

⁸ An allusion to the fate of the Danaids, who in Hades forever poured water into a vessel with a perforated bottom.

- 2) Important Points:
 - a) **Value of Recollection:** The chapter emphasizes the importance of looking back on one's life with a clear conscience, suggesting that those who live virtuously can reflect on their past without regret, thereby gaining a sense of fulfillment and continuity.
 - b) **Critique of Material Pursuits:** Seneca criticizes those who are preoccupied with material achievements and pleasures, arguing that such pursuits are transient and ultimately unfulfilling, leading to a life that is superficial and short-lived.
- 3) Comparison with Virginia Woolf's Fiction:
 - a) **Exploration of Time and Consciousness:** Like Seneca, Woolf often explores the nature of time and human consciousness. However, Woolf's approach is more experimental, using stream-of-consciousness techniques to depict the inner lives of her characters.
 - b) **Focus on the Individual's Experience:** Both authors emphasize the individual's experience of time and life. Woolf, however, provides a more nuanced exploration of the subjective nature of these experiences, often highlighting the complexities and contradictions of the human psyche.
- 4) Quick summary: Seneca's Chapter 10 promotes reflection on the past as a means to achieve a sense of permanence and fulfillment, both Virginia Woolf's fiction offer a more complex and nuanced exploration of time, consciousness, and the human experience.

Quick Review

For this podcast, I initiated comparisons and contrasts between Seneca, my own work, and that of diverse literary figures who I see as philosophers of existence in their own right: Walt Whitman, Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, Emily Dickinson, and Virginia Woolf.

My own work *Playful Nowheres* combines elements of poetry and philosophy. (Again, I have provided a link where you can download my text.) Mostly, these were bits I had cut out of my dissertation as it developed between 2018 and 2022. Since it was not an academic work, per se, I was able to intersect philosophy and poetry for emphasizing explorations of meaningful existential themes. Because it owes a great deal to what my dissertation became, there is a great deal of focus on marginalized experiences.

I do believe that my next podcast will discuss in more depth the works of Whitman, Rilke, and others such as William S. Burroughs whose creative poetics have all influenced my thinking.

But picking back up our current task, I furthered the examination of Seneca's "On the Shortness of Life," to explore themes of time's value, the pursuit of philosophical living, and the transient nature of material achievements. The podcast included in-depth exploration of philosophical themes, particularly in the context of Seneca's work and its comparison with other authors like Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson. These discussions highlighted the nuances in each author's

approach to existential themes, such as the nature of time, the inner self, and the human condition.

I really hope you found this discussion not only an academic exercise but also a reflective journey through various existential and poetic landscapes.

Next Time

For the next actual podcast after this one—CMM0018, look for my musings on Whitman’s “Poems of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth.” It might mix a little Martin Heidegger up with it, definitely a bit of Burroughs and the Beat Generation.

When I come back for the next episode in this particular series—probably CMM0019—we will pick up with Chapters 11 through 15 of *DE BREVI TATE VITAE* and continue to find its resonances with thinkers of the human condition from Søren Kierkegaard to Karl Jaspers, Walt Whitman to Frank Herbert.

Thanks for knowledge-gathering with me today. Let me know if you have any questions or comments.