

the very ground with marble—wealth not only in your possession but even under your feet! Let there be statues too, and paintings, and everything any art has devised to indulge your expensive taste. What will you learn from these things? Only how to desire more. ⁹ Natural desires are limited; those born of false opinion have no stopping point, for falsehood is inherently unbounded. Those who travel by the road have some destination; wandering is limitless.

So pull back from empty things. When you want to know what it is that you are pursuing, whether it involves a natural desire or a blind one, consider whether there is any place where your desire can come to rest. If it goes far and yet always has further to go, you may be sure it is not natural.
Farewell.

Letter 17

From Seneca to Lucilius

Greetings

¹ Throw it all away if you are wise—or if you want to be. Press on toward excellence of mind with all your speed, with all your strength. If anything holds you back, untie the knot, or cut it!

“What stands in my way,” you say, “is my family business. I want to get it set up in such a way that it will be able to provide for me while I am inactive, so that poverty will not be a burden to me nor I to anyone else.” ² When you say this, you seem not to realize the meaning and power of that good you have in view. You understand in a general way what great benefits philosophy confers, but you do not perceive the finer points: how much assistance it gives us in every endeavor, how it not only “facilitates” our great affairs, as Cicero says, but attends to even our smallest needs.^{*} Trust me: you should make philosophy your advocate. It will persuade you not to linger over your balance sheet.

³ No doubt your aim, the purpose of all your delay, is to ensure that you need not fear poverty. But what if poverty is actually something to pursue? Many have found riches an obstacle to the philo-

sophical life: poverty is untrammelled, carefree. When the trumpet sounds, the poor know that they are not the ones who are under attack; when alarm of fire is raised, they look around for the exit, not for their belongings. When a poor person is about to embark, there is no tumult at the harbor, no bustling throng along the beach, attendants all of a single person; no pack of slaves standing around, to make one wish for the produce of foreign lands just to feed them all. ⁴ Feeding bellies is a simple matter when there are only a few of them, and when they are well trained, desiring only to be filled. If hunger is cheap; it is the palate that is expensive. Poverty is content to satisfy the immediate wants.

Why, then, do you refuse to take as your companion one whose habits it is sensible for the wealthy to imitate?^{*} ⁵ If you want to have time for your mind, you must either be poor or resemble the poor. Study cannot be beneficial without some concern for frugality, and frugality is just voluntary poverty. So away with your excuses! “I don’t yet have enough; once I reach that amount, I will devote my whole self to philosophy.” Yet what is the very first thing you need to acquire? The very thing you are putting off; the lowest thing on your list. That is the place you need to begin. You say, “I want to get something ready for me to live on.” While you are doing that, better learn to get yourself ready. Even if something prevents you from having a good living, nothing prevents you from having a good death.

⁶ Our practice of philosophy need not be hindered by poverty or even by extreme want. Those who are hastening in this direction should be ready to bear even hunger. People have borne hunger in time of siege, and what did they gain for their endurance besides not being left to the mercy of a conqueror? How much greater is this promise: freedom that lasts, and fear of no one, human or divine! Is that not worth going after, even while starving? ⁷ Armies have endured being deprived of everything; they have lived on the roots of plants; they have starved off hunger with things too foul to name; and all for domination—stranger still, for another person’s domination! Who, then, will hesitate to put up with poverty when the aim is to liberate the mind from fits of madness? Therefore there is nothing you need to acquire beforehand. You may come to philosophy even without money for the journey.

sometimes even a single reply—a finger touching the scalp—a roll of the eyes.* The immoral one is revealed by a laugh; the insane by his expression and bearing. All these things are open to view just by reading the signs. You can find out what sort of person each man is if you note how he praises others and how he himself is praised.

13 Listeners on every side are stretching out their hands toward the philosopher; a crowd of admirers clusters right in his face: you understand what is going on. That is no longer praise; it is only applause. All such fanfare should be left to those arts which make it their business to please the public; let philosophy be greeted with reverence.

14 We will have to allow the young to yield to their impulsive minds—but only when they are indeed acting on impulse, when they cannot bid themselves be silent. Such praise conveys a kind of exhortation to the hearers themselves; it acts as a spur to the youthful spirit. But let them be stirred by the subject, not by affected phrasology. Otherwise eloquence is harmful to them, making them eager for itself rather than for its subject matter.

15 I shall postpone further discussion of this, for it requires a lengthy treatment of its own: how one should lecture to the people, how much leeway to give yourself in their presence and how much to them in yours. There can be no doubt that philosophy has lost something by making a public spectacle of itself. Yet it is possible to lay open even its inner sanctum. For that, though, its representative must be a priest, not a huckster.

Farewell.

Letter 53

From Seneca to Lucilius

(Greetings)

1 What can I not be talked into? This time I was persuaded to take a trip by boat! The sea was calm when I set out. To be sure, the sky was heavy with mottled clouds, the kind that usually resolve themselves into rain or squalls; but I thought the mileage was so short from your town of Parthenope to Puteoli that I could get away with making the trip, even in uncertain and threatening weather.* So I tried to get done with it quickly by heading through the deep water directly toward the isle of Nesis, intending a shortcut past all the inlets.

2 The moment I got to where it made no difference whether I went on or turned back, the calm surface that had enticed me was no more. It was not yet a storm but sloping seas, with the waves ever more frequent. I began asking the helmsman to let me off somewhere on shore; he said, though, that the coastline was rugged and without anchorage, and that in a storm the land was the very thing he feared the most. 3 But I was in too bad a way to have any use for danger. I had that persistent seasickness that brings on nausea but does not relieve it by vomiting. So I forced the issue with the helmsman and required him to head for shore whether he wanted to or not.

As we drew near I did not wait for any of the instructions in Virgil to be carried out, for them to “turn the bow seaward” or “cast the anchor from the bow.”* Remembering my abilities (for I have long been a swimmer), I threw myself into the sea as a cold-water enthusiast should, wearing my mantle. 4 Just imagine how I suffered as I staggered forward through the breakers, seeking a way, forcing a way. I understood then that sailors have reason to fear the land. It is unbelievable how much I endured just because I could not endure myself! Let me tell you, the reason Ulysses had shipwrecks everywhere was not so much that he was born to an angry sea; no, he was just prone to seasickness. I too will take twenty years to get wherever I am going if I have to get there by ship!

5 As soon as I had settled my stomach—for you know it takes longer to escape from seasickness than from the sea—and as soon as I had applied some oil to refresh my body, I began to reflect on how easily we forget our imperfections. We forget even our obvious bodily defects, which give us constant reminders, but still more do we forget those that do not show on the outside—and the worse they are, the less we can see them. 6 A slight fever can deceive a person, but when it increases and becomes a genuine illness, even the toughest and most enduring are forced to admit it. There's pain in the feet, a pricking sensation in the joints; we pretend it isn't there, saying we've twisted an ankle or worn ourselves out by some exertion. As long as there is doubt, as long as the disease is in its early stages, we invent some specious name for it; but when it begins to cramp up the lower leg and cause distortion in both feet, we have no choice but to admit that it is arthritis. 7 It is the opposite with those infirmities that affect the mind.* With these, the worse one is afflicted, the less he is aware of it. There's nothing surprising in that, dear Lucilius. When one is just barely asleep, one has impressions in accordance with that state of rest and is sometimes even conscious of being asleep; deep sleep, though, blots out even our dreams, drowning the mind so deep that it has no awareness of itself at all. 8 Why do people not admit their faults? Because they are still in the midst of them. Dreams are told by those who are awake; admitting to one's faults is a sign of health.

Let us wake up, then, so that we will be able to recognize our mistakes. But philosophy is the only thing that will awaken us; the only thing that will rouse us from our deep sleep. Devote yourself entirely to philosophy. You are worthy of it, and it of you: embrace one another. Refuse every other claim on you, boldly and openly: there is no reason you need to do philosophy only in your spare time. 9 If you were ill, you would take a break from your responsibilities at home. Your career concerns would drop away; no one's defense case would be so important to you that you would go back down to the Forum while still anticipating a relapse. All your efforts would be devoted to freeing yourself from disease as soon as possible. What about it, then? Will you not do the same thing now? Get rid of everything that stands in your way; make time for excellence of mind. No one gets there while occupied with business.

Philosophy asserts its power. It grants us time; it does not merely

accept what we give to it. Philosophy is a full-time job, not a hobby; it is our supervisor, and orders us to appear.¹⁰ Alexander once said to a town that promised him part of its arable land and half of all its production, "My purpose in coming to Asia was not to receive any gifts you might give, but to allow you to keep anything that I might leave."¹¹ Philosophy says the same thing, but in every situation. "I am not going to accept just the time you have left over; rather, you will have what I reject."

11 Turn your entire mind to philosophy. Sit by philosophy and serve it, and you will be much above other people. Mortals will all be far behind you, and the gods not far ahead. Would you like to know what difference there will be between you and the gods? They will have a longer time of existence. But to encompass a complete whole in a miniature work of art—that is indeed the sign of a great craftsman. For the wise, a lifetime is as spacious as all of time is for God.* Indeed, there is a way the sage surpasses God. It is by gift of nature that God is without fear; the sage gives that same gift to himself. 12 Here indeed is a great achievement: to retain our human weakness and yet have the tranquility of God.

It is amazing what power there is in philosophy to beat back all the assaults of chance. No weapon lodges in its flesh; its defenses cannot be penetrated. When fortune's darts come in, it either ducks and lets them pass by, or stands its ground and lets them bounce back against the assailant.

Farewell.

Letter 54

From Seneca to Lucilius

Greetings

1 I'll health had given me a long respite; then suddenly it assailed me again. "What was the trouble?" you ask—and well you may, for there is no illness with which I am unacquainted. But there is one that has me in its charge, so to speak. Why should I use its Greek name? I can call it wheezing; that fits well enough.