

LETTER 122

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. Already the day is getting shorter. It has diminished a bit, but even so there is still a generous amount left if one arises with the day, so to speak. But you are more responsible and even better if you get ahead of the day and catch the first light. The person who lies in bed half asleep while the sun is high and whose day doesn't start till noon is shameful. And still this counts as pre-dawn for many people.

2. Some people have reversed the functions of day and night and don't pry open their eyes, heavy with yesterday's hangover, before night begins to fall. The situation of those whom nature, as Vergil says, located beneath our feet on the other side of the world:

when first the rising sun breathes on us with his gasping horses
for them rosy sundown kindles his lagging lights¹

—that is what life (rather than their location) is like for these people; they are opposite to everyone else.

3. There are some 'antipodans', [living] in the same city [as we do], who, as Marcus Cato said, have never seen the sun either rising or setting. Do you suppose that those people know *how* one ought to live, when they don't even know *when*? And do these people *fear* death, when they have buried themselves alive in it? They are as ill-omened as night birds. Let them pass their dark periods amidst wine and perfume, let them drag out this whole period of perverted wakefulness with feasts—even feasts cooked separately in several courses—even so they aren't banqueting, they are conducting their funeral rites. The Feast of the Dead, at least, is held in the daytime.

But, my Lord, no day is long when one is doing something. Let us lengthen our life—action is both our responsibility in life and an indication that we are alive. Let's put a limit to night and shift part of it into the daytime.

4. Birds which are being readied for the feast are caged in darkness so that they can easily fatten up when they aren't moving. In the same way

¹ Vergil, *Georgics* 1.250-1.

the lazy bodies of those who lie about without any exercise puff up ... a slothful stuffing sets in. But the bodies of people who dedicate themselves to darkness appear revolting. Their skin colour is more disturbing than that of pasty invalids. They are pale, lazy, and feeble. Their flesh is cadaverous although they are still among the living. But this, I would say, is the least of their failings. There is far more darkness in their minds! One of them is stunned, another's eyes go dark and he envies the blind. Who has ever had eyes for the sake of darkness?

5. Do you ask about the cause of this mental depravity, avoiding day and shifting one's whole life into the night? All vices rebel against nature; all of them abandon the proper order of things. This is the purpose that luxury aims at, to rejoice in what is twisted and not just to deviate from what is straight but to get as far away from it as possible, and stand directly opposed to it.

6. Don't you think that people are living contrary to nature if they drink on an empty stomach, take wine when they are hungry and then move on to eating when they are drunk? And yet this is a common failing of young people—they build up their strength <so that> they can do their drinking amidst the naked bathers pretty much on the threshold of the bathhouse—worse, so that they can steep themselves and then immediately clean off the sweat stimulated by their constant and feverish drinking. Drinking *after* lunch or dinner is just banal—that is what old farmers do, people who just don't understand real pleasure. Straight wine is enjoyed when it isn't awash in food, when it can get straight to the brain. Drunkenness is really fun when it occupies a vacuum.

7. Don't you think that men who wear women's clothes are living contrary to nature? Aren't men living contrary to nature when they aim to gleam with youthful good looks when they are well past it? What could be more cruel or more wretched? Will he never be taken for a man, though he can be taken *by* a man for a good long time? And when his sex ought to have exempted him from abuse, will not even his age liberate him from it?

8. Don't people who long for roses in winter live contrary to nature, and those who force lilies in mid-winter with baths of warm water and careful changes of location? Don't people who plant apple trees at the top of towers live contrary to nature, people whose groves wave in the wind up on the rooftops, with roots planted where it would have been presumptuous for tree-tops to have reached? Do they not live contrary to nature when they build foundations for baths in the sea and when they don't think they can have a sophisticated swim unless their warm pools are rocked by wind and waves?

9. When they have made up their minds to want everything contrary to nature's custom, at last they totally defect from nature. 'It is day—time for sleep! It is night—time—let's get some exercise, let's go for a drive, let's have lunch. It's nearly daylight—time for dinner. It won't do to do what ordinary people do—living in a hackneyed and vulgar style is revolting. Daytime can be for ordinary people—let's do something unique and special today.'

10. In my view, those people are as good as dead. How far are they, really, from their own genuinely untimely funerals—after all, they live by torchlight and candlelight! I recall that many people lived this lifestyle all at the same time, among them Aelius Buta, the praetorian; he is the one to whom Tibertius said, after he had squandered his enormous inheritance and was pleading poverty, 'You have woken up a bit late.'

11. Julius Montanus was giving a poetic recitation, an acceptable poet and one known both for his friendship with Tibertius and for the chill in their relationship. He used to fill his poems with sunrises and sunsets; so, when some people complained that his recitations lasted all day and said that one should not attend them, Pinarus Natta said 'Surely I cannot be more generous—I am ready to listen to him from "sunrise" to "sunset"?'

12. When Montanus had recited these verses:

Phoebus begins to send forth his burning flames,
Rosy day begins to spread, and already the sad swallow
Returning to her nest begins to feed her shrill nestlings
And shares it out with gentle beak...

Then Varus, a Roman knight, a friend of Marcus Vinicius, and a devotee of high-class feasts (a privilege earned by his cutting wit) shouted out 'Buta is ready for sleep!'

13. Then, when Montanus had later recited:

Already the shepherds had bedded down their flocks in the fold
Already slow night begins to grant quiet to the sleepy hands

the same Varus said 'What are you saying? Is it night already? I must go to make my daily visit to Buta! Nothing was more famous than this man's inverted lifestyle—one which, as I said, many people lived at that same time.

14. Now the reason why some people live this way is not that they think that night itself has something particularly pleasant about it, but that they aren't satisfied by anything ordinary; and that daylight is burdensome to

a guilty conscience; and that daylight, because it costs nothing, is a bore for someone who desires or despises everything depending on how much or how little it costs. Moreover, extravagant people want their life to be talked about as long as they live. For if they aren't talked about they think they are wasting their effort. And so from time to time they do something to stir up rumour. Many gobble up their fortunes, many keep mistresses. To earn a reputation among people like that you need not just something extravagant but something notorious. In a city preoccupied with this sort of thing, run-of-the-mill bad behaviour does not get you a scandal.

15. I had once heard Albinovannus Pedo (and he really was a very sophisticated storyteller) relate that he used to live above the house of Sextus Papinius—he was one of these 'daylight avoiders'. He said 'At the third hour of the night I hear the sound of whips, so I ask what he is doing. The answer is that he is reviewing the household accounts. At the sixth hour of the night I hear an excited uproar, so I ask what is going on. The answer is that he is doing his voice exercises. At the eighth hour of the night I ask what the noise of wheels is supposed to mean. The answer is that he is going for a drive.

16. At dawn there is a lot of scurrying about, slaves are summoned, the storekeepers and cooks are in an uproar. I ask what is going on. The answer is that he has asked for a sweet drink and some porridge, since he has just finished his bath. The comment was made, "his feast took up more than a day!" Not at all. For he lived very frugally and consumed nothing except the night. And so when some people said that Sextus was a stingy miser, Pedo rejoined 'You would even say that he lives on lamp oil.'

17. You should not be surprised if you find so many distinct kinds of vice. They are quite varied and have many manifestations; one cannot grasp all their types. Concern for what is straight is a simple matter; concern for what is crooked is complex and admits of as many new deviations as you could want. The same thing applies to character. The character of those who follow nature is easy and unrestricted, with few variations. The perverted are in great conflict with everyone else and with themselves.

18. But I think that the chief cause of this disorder is a fussiness about the ordinary lifestyle. Just as they mark themselves off from other people by their dress, by the sophistication of their dinner parties, by the splendour of their vehicles, they also want to be marked off by the way they use their time. People who regard notoriety as the reward for going astray do not want to commit ordinary mistakes.

19. All those who live backwards, if I can put it that way, are looking for notoriety. And so, Lucilius, we must cling to the life which nature has laid down for us and not deviate from it. If we follow nature everything is easy and unimpeded, but if we struggle against it then our life is no different than that of men who are trying to row against the current.²
Farewell.

² This is an allusion to Vergil, *Georgics* 1.199–202. Compare at 122.2 above. My thanks to James Ker for pointing this out.