

LETTER 123

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. I have arrived late at night at my Alban estate, worn out by a journey that was uncomfortable rather than lengthy. I find nothing prepared except myself. And so I repose my weariness on a small couch and am in fact content with the fact that the cook and the baker are delayed. For I can discuss with myself this very matter: that what you take lightly is not burdensome, that nothing is worth being upset about, <as long as you don't> make it worse by getting upset all on your own.

2. My baker has no bread; but my house-manager does, and so do my steward and the tenant-farmer. You say, 'But it's poor-quality bread.' Just wait—it will turn into good bread. Hunger will make even this into soft, white bread. That just shows that one should not eat until hunger says to do so. Therefore I will wait and won't eat until I either start to have some good bread or cease to be fussy about the bad bread.

3. It is essential to get used to modest food; even people who are wealthy and well equipped meet with many difficulties due to the circumstances of time and place... No one can have whatever he wants, but one can have this: not to want what one does not have and to make cheerful use of what is on offer. A well-behaved stomach which is tolerant of insult makes a major contribution to freedom.

4. You could not imagine how much pleasure I derive from the fact that my weariness is content with itself. I don't go looking for masseurs, a bath, or any other remedy but time. For rest relieves what hard work has accumulated. The meal before me, such as it is, is more satisfying than an inaugural banquet.

5. You see, I have undertaken a kind of impromptu trial of my mind; this kind of test is more candid and revealing. For when the mind has prepared itself and commanded itself to endure, then it is not so obvious how much real firmness it has. The most reliable proofs are those which the mind gives without warning, if it contemplates troubles not just with equanimity but with contentment; if it does not flare up in anger, does not quarrel; if it makes up for the lack of something which it ought to have

been given by not wanting it and if it reflects that although there might be something missing from what it is accustomed to, the mind itself lacks nothing.

6. With many things we don't realize how superfluous they are until we begin to lack them. We made use of them not because we were supposed to have them but because we did have them. And how many things do we acquire just because others have done so, because most people have them! One cause for our troubles is that we live by the example of others; we do not settle ourselves by reason but get swept away by custom. If just a few people did something we would not want to imitate it, but when many people start to do it then we pursue it—as though it were more honourable because it is more common. Once a mistake becomes widespread we treat it as being right.

7. Nowadays everyone travels with a guard of Numidian horsemen or a phalanx of runners ahead of them; it is shameful to have no one to shove passers-by out of the way and to indicate by big clouds of dust that a high-ranking man is approaching. Nowadays everyone has mules to carry their glassware, their agate, and their collection of vessels engraved by famous artists; it is shameful for people to see that the only baggage you have is what can be knocked around with impunity. Everybody's retinue rides along with faces covered in creams so that the sun and the cold don't harm their tender skins; it is shameful that among the boys who accompany you there should be not one whose healthy face is free of cosmetic ointments.

8. You must avoid conversation with all these people. These are people who pass on their vices and transfer them from one place to another. We used to think that the worst people were those who bandy words, but there are some now who bandy vices. Their conversation does a lot of harm, for even if it has no immediate effect it leaves seeds in our mind and pursues us even when we have left them behind, a bad influence which will re-awaken later on.

9. Just as those who have heard a concert carry away with them in their ears that tone and the pleasure of the songs—which hinders their thoughts and won't let them focus on serious matters—so too the conversation of flatterers and those who praise their vices lingers long after the talking has stopped. Nor is it a simple matter to drive the pleasant sound from one's mind; it presses on, it endures, and it comes back after a break. So one must close one's ears against harmful voices, especially at first. For once they have started and been allowed in they become bolder.

10. This is how one arrives at this kind of speech: 'Virtue, philosophy, and justice are just the babble of empty words. The only happiness is doing well by your life. Eating, drinking, spending one's inheritance—this is living; this is what it means to remember that you are mortal. The days pass by and life which cannot be reclaimed slips away. Are we hesitating? What good does it do to be "wise" and to heap frugality onto a lifespan which will not always be able to absorb pleasures—[do so] now, anyway, while it can, while it must. Get ahead of death and ... for yourself whatever death will take away. You don't have a mistress, nor a boy who can make your mistress jealous. You go around sober each and every day. You dine as though you had to have your account-book approved by your father. This isn't living; it's helping out with someone else's life.'

11. It is madness to take care of your heir's estate and deny yourself everything, so that your huge inheritance might turn your friend into your enemy; for the more he inherits, the more he will rejoice at your death. Don't give a damn for those grim and censorious critics of other people's lives who hate their own and act like public school-marks. Don't hesitate to put a good life ahead of good reputation.'

12. You must flee from these voices as from those which Ulysses did not dare to sail by unless lashed to the mast. They have the same power—they draw you away from your country, from your parents, from your friends, from the virtues, and entice you into a life which is shameful, and if shameful then wretched. How much better it is to pursue the right path and to bring yourself to the point where only what is honourable is satisfying to you.

13. We will be able to accomplish this if we are aware that there are two kinds of things which can either entice us or repel us. The enticements come from wealth, pleasure, beauty, ambition, and everything else which is attractive and appealing. The repulsions come from effort, death, pain, public shame, and a restricted lifestyle. Hence we ought to train ourselves not to fear the latter and not to desire the former. Let us work against our inclinations, withdraw from what is attractive and rouse ourselves against what assails us.

14. Do you not see the difference in posture of those going downhill and those going uphill? Those who descend lean their bodies back; those who are climbing lean forward. For if you are going downhill, Lucius, then throwing your weight forward is going along with vice, and if you are going uphill then leaning back is doing the same. It is downhill towards pleasure, but one must go uphill towards what is harsh and tough. When

climbing we must drive our bodies onwards, when descending we must hold them back.

15. Do you now think that I am saying that the only people who are dangerous to hear are those who praise pleasure and stimulate the fear of pain—which is daunting enough on its own? I also think that we can be harmed by those who, in the guise of the Stoic school, urge us on to vices. For they claim that only the wise and learned man is a lover. 'He alone is suited for this art. Similarly, the wise man is most skilled at drinking and banqueting. So let us explore the question, up to what age youths are proper objects of love.'

16. These are concessions to Greek custom, and we would do better to pay attention to the following: 'No one is good by accident; virtue must be learned. Pleasure is a lowly and weak thing, worthless, shared with brute beasts; the most paltry and contemptible animals flock to it. Glory is something empty and unstable, more fickle than the wind. Poverty is only bad for you if you resist it. Death is not evil—do you ask what <it is>? Death alone is the even-handed law which governs the human race. Superstition is an insane mistake; it fears those it should love and offends those it reveres. For what difference does it make whether you deny that the gods exist or slander them?'

17. This is what you must learn—no, learn by heart. Philosophy should not provide excuses for vice. The sick man has no prospect of health if his doctor exhorts him to dissipation.

Farewell.