The Reading Endeavour:
(Re)constructing Senecan Thought

In Epistle 84 Seneca associates learning with the activity of bees (Ep. 84.3-5). This article examines the way in which this metaphor gives an indication as to how Seneca views and uses intertextual quotation and allusion. In particular, it looks at the complications of direct quotation wherein the quoted text brings its own baggage to the new product. Lowell Edmunds raises the issue of how the context of the quoted text impacts on the text which is under investigation: to what extent does the context of the quotation affect the reader’s perception of the text they are reading?¹ And in the case of the quotation on which this article focuses, what if the quotation is itself a quotation?²

Gian Biagio Conte’s distinctly structuralist approach to intertextuality, although it has been criticised,³ nevertheless assists the reader in making sense of our perception of the interconnected nature of classical literature:

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¹ Lowell Edmunds, Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 139.
² Intertextuality is mostly recognised in classical studies as being an event which happens on the side of the reader and cannot necessarily be traced back to authorial intent: Don Fowler, ‘On the Shoulders of Giants: Intertextuality and Classical Studies’, MD 39 (1997): 24; Stephen Hinds, Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48; Edmunds, Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry, 24. Fowler’s treatment of the general feeling toward the idea as it was in the 1990s is particularly interesting in its suggestions for forward advancement in the field away from the narrow kinds of intertextuality commonly found in classical scholarship, Fowler, ‘On the Shoulders of Giants’, 28-32.
³ Fowler, ‘On the Shoulders of Giants’, 24: ‘The problem with such a formulation [a structuralist one] is ... that it exaggerates the degree to which the literary system is a unified and stable one: it suggests that there is a single matrix which contains all the possibilities, and that we can therefore say that this or that intertextual relation is ‘there’ in the system, waiting to be activated in reading. From a post-structuralist point of view, this looks like a mystification.’
It is ... not difficult today to accept the idea that a text can be read only in connection with, and in opposition to, other texts. These texts form a grid through which the text is perceived according to the expectations of a reader capable of organizing its sense.\(^4\)

This article addresses the way in which Seneca's *Epistula* 84 can be read in terms of its imagery and in terms of its quotation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Firstly, this article will treat the way Seneca introduces the metaphor and *Aeneid* quotation, followed by a discussion of how the metaphor functions in regards to the quotation. It will then trace this quotation back from Virgil’s *Aeneid* to the earlier *Georgics*, in accordance with the idea that the final product is a synthesis of previous works. But the question of the dynamic of this appropriation must be addressed: is Seneca successful in synthesising this Virgilian image, or does it carry with it some themes and ideas from the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*?

This article treats in depth the first of three metaphors used in the letter to describe a mixing of different elements into a new product. They are the production of honey, (*Ep.* 84.3-5), digestion (6-7),\(^5\) and a chorus (9-10). Seneca spends the most time on bees and honey with a scientific digression on the nature of honey production (*Ep.* 84.4). The primacy of the metaphor, supported by quotation and scientific digression indicate that this is the leading metaphor for the letter as a whole.\(^6\)

**Reading and Exercise**

Situated fairly late in the collection, *Epistula* 84 expands upon the theme of hermeneutics encountered in Book 1,\(^7\) Book 4,\(^8\) Book 5,\(^9\) Book 7\(^10\) and Book


\(^5\) This metaphor is supplemented by a simile, wherein the final product should resemble its inspiration like a son resembles his father, Sen. *Ep.* 84.8.

\(^6\) This is not to suggest that the other metaphors are not important in the letter. Cf. John Henderson, *Morals and Villas in Seneca’s Letters: Places to Dwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 46-48.


\(^8\) ibid., 33, 39.

\(^9\) ibid., 45.

\(^10\) ibid., 64.
The theme develops in Book 1 from the idea of reading a few authors thoroughly\textsuperscript{12} to the gathering and dissemination of knowledge, in order to create a more reciprocal relationship with other authors.\textsuperscript{13} In the first three books, Epicurus is cited in the form of aphorisms for Lucilius to digest. \textit{Epistula} 33, the second letter in Book 4, emphatically rejects this approach and demands that Lucilius stop focusing on quotations and that he read the work as a whole. By doing this, Seneca argues, Lucilius will be able to both better understand the works he reads and give his own opinion on the matter, rather than simply quoting other authors. At \textit{Epistula} 39 we discover that Lucilius is struggling to take this advice on board and has asked for summaries from Seneca (which is a step up from quotation).\textsuperscript{14} At \textit{Epistula} 45 Lucilius has improved a little more, he asks for Seneca’s own work rather than the books which Seneca has read in order to produce that work.\textsuperscript{15} Later Seneca says that the discoveries of the past are a delight to inherit but simply preserving them is not enough; it is important that a person contributes to the tradition.\textsuperscript{16} We can see the idea developing thus: early on Seneca exhorts Lucilius to reciprocate and later he continues and develops exhortations designed to encourage Lucilius to contribute to the tradition.\textsuperscript{17} When Lucilius begins composing his poem about Aetna, Seneca encourages him to add to the literary corpus.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, he writes that Lucilius should not despair that his topic has been written about before: \textit{praeterea condicio optima est ultimi; parata uerbi inuenit, quae aliter instructa nouam faciem habent} (‘he who writes last is in the best position, for he finds the words already there, which, when assembled differently, show a new aspect’).\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Epistula} 84 is a continuation of this set of ideas.

\textit{Epistula} 84 opens with Seneca writing to his friend: itinera ista, quae segnitiam mihi excutiant, et ualitudini meae prodesse iudico et studiis (‘those journeys which shake the lethargy out of me, I judge them to be good for both my health

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} ibid., 79.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} ibid., 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} ibid., 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Commentarii, ibid., 39.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} ibid., 45.2 f.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} ibid., 64.7 f.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Evidently, Lucilius’ little book did not achieve what Seneca wanted (\textit{Ep.} 46). For an interesting discussion on \textit{Epistula} 46 see Marcus Wilson, ‘Seneca’s \textit{Epistles to Lucilius}: A Revaluation,’ \textit{Ramus} 16 (1987): 104-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Sen. \textit{Ep.} 79.4-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} ibid., 74.6. All translations are my own.
\end{itemize}
and my studies’). Travelling not only enables him to get some physical exercise but also to do some reading:

quare ualitudinem adiuuent, uides: cum pigrum me et neglectem corporis litterarum amor faciat, aliena opera exerceor; studio quare prosint, indicabo: a lectionibus nihil recessi.\(^{21}\)

Why they [the journeys] can help, you shall see: love of letters makes me lazy and makes me unmindful of my body, I am kept busy by another’s work; I shall show how they are helpful for study: I have withdrawn not a bit from readings.

Travelling is good for his \textit{studia} because he is reading during the excursion. Next, Seneca jumps to the idea of reading as a kind of journey, one which keeps him from being satisfied with his own thoughts alone:

sunt autem, ut existimo, necessariae, primum ne sim me uno contentus; deinde ut, cum ab aliis quaesita cognouero, tum et de inuentis iudicem et cogitem de inueniendis.\(^{22}\)

They [readings] are necessary, primarily so that I may not be content with myself alone; thereafter, when I have learned what has been found out by others, then I can make a judgement about the findings and think about things to be found.

He crosses over from physical space to metaphorical space – from actual journeys to reading journeys. For Seneca, reading is mental exercise, it strengthens and nourishes the mind weary from study (\textit{alit lectio ingenium et studio fatigatum}),\(^{23}\) but this strengthening cannot be achieved without study (\textit{non sine studio}).\(^{24}\) Seneca then advises that we should not spend too long writing nor too long reading (\textit{nec scribere tantum nec tantum legere debemus}), but mix it

\(^{20}\) ibid., 84.1. Studium more usually means denotes interest toward something (\textit{s.v. OLD} 1-6). However, in the context of this letter it becomes clear that Seneca is talking about intellectual activity such as study (\textit{s.v. OLD} 7a).

\(^{21}\) Sen. \textit{Ep.} 84.1.

\(^{22}\) ibid., 84.1.

\(^{23}\) These two meanings of \textit{alere} are both possible here; on the one hand Seneca equates reading with exercise, but a little later on, he will equate reading with eating, ibid., 84.7 \textit{f}.

\(^{24}\) ibid., 84.1.
up.\textsuperscript{25} This will have the effect of a balanced exercise regime for the mind: too much writing will exhaust it \textit{(uires...exhuriet)} and too much reading will loosen it and make it watery \textit{(soluet ac diluet)}. The message is that the mind is to be treated like the body and to be kept toned.

Reading and writing, like exercise and rest, need to be alternated to achieve the best results. But there is an element of discovery. What Seneca finds on his reading journeys is then processed into writing: \textit{inuicem hoc et illo commemandum est et alterum altero temperandum, ut quicquid lectione collectum est, stilus redigat in corpus} (‘one should visit each of them alternately and blend them together, so that whatever you collect in your reading, your stylus distils it into substance’).\textsuperscript{26} In order to produce good work, we need a balanced life-style of reading and writing.

\textbf{Just Like Honey}

This remark about distilling ideas allows Seneca to glide into another set of images, a world away from walks in the literary-acreage, or so it seems at first. Seneca reports that some say men ought to copy bees, which go out and gather nectar from different flowers and bring back their findings to distil them in their combs. He follows with a quote from Virgil: \textit{linquentia melia | stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas} (‘they compress the liquid honey and stretch their combs with sweet nectar’).\textsuperscript{27} This description is taken from a simile in Book 1 of the Aeneid: Seneca has already journeyed out to ‘read-and-raid’ Virgil’s work.\textsuperscript{28} The simile describes the construction site of Carthage as Aeneas approaches. As Aeneas looks out upon the Carthaginians hard at work, Virgil likens their activity to bees:

\begin{verbatim}
qualis apes aestate noua per florea rura
exercet sub sole labor, cum gentis adults
educunt fetus, aut cum liquentia melia
stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas,
aut onera accipiunt uenientum, aut agmine facto
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{25} ibid., 84.2.
\textsuperscript{26} ibid., 84.2.
\textsuperscript{27} Verg. \textit{Aen.} 1.432 f.
\textsuperscript{28} Henderson, \textit{Morals and Villas in Seneca’s Letters}, 46.
ignauum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent;
feruet opus redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.\(^{29}\)

Just like bees in early summer amongst the flowery country side cultivate their
task beneath the sun, when they lead forth their full grown young of their kind,
or press liquid honey and stretch the cells with sweet nectar, or when they
receive the burdens of visitors, or ward off the drones, a spiritless herd from the
home; their work is intense and the fragrant honey carries the aroma of thyme.

By focusing on the productivity and flourishing aspects of bee society, this
image depicts Carthage as a civilisation on the rise. It is early in the season
\textit{(aestate nova)}. But the quotation \textit{liquenta mella | stipant et dulci distendunt
nectare cells} (‘they press liquid honey and stretch the cells with sweet nectar’)
is very close to Virgil’s own phrasing in the \textit{Georgics: purissima mella | stipant
et liquido distendunt nectare cells} (‘they press purest honey and stretch the
cells with liquid nectar’).\(^{30}\) The \textit{Aeneid} quotation is thus a reference to this
passage in the \textit{Georgics}. It seems apparent that although Seneca is referring
directly to the \textit{Aeneid}, he is using a theme and an image which also plays central
role in the \textit{Georgics}. So while we are stretching our mental legs around the
site of Carthage, a spatio-temporal disjunction, initiated by the bee metaphor,
ruptures the simple quotation by the reader’s awareness that Virgil used this
image before the \textit{Aeneid}, opening up onto an apiarian vista.\(^{31}\)

The purloined passage thus shows unmistakeable traces of its origin—lifted by
Virgil from his own \textit{Georgics}.\(^{32}\) Cleverly, Seneca has managed to refer to two
texts with one quotation: ‘[t]ake a reading of the \textit{Aeneid} which brought home a
simile that pointed silently to the process of processing with the same ‘corpus’
which silently incorporated the earlier project of the \textit{Georgics}, so as to write a
definitive \textit{Virgil’}.\(^{33}\) In a letter addressing the idea of reprocessing, this Virgil
quotation stands out because clearly it has not been fully reprocessed. Using
Conte’s textual grid the reader might ask not only what the relationship is be-
tween this letter and the \textit{Aeneid} but also between this letter and the \textit{Georgics}.\(^{34}\)

\(^{29}\) Verg. \textit{Aen.} 1.430-6.
\(^{30}\) Verg. G. 4.163 f.
\(^{32}\) Verg. G. 4.156-64.
\(^{33}\) Henderson, \textit{Morals and Villas in Seneca’s Letters}, 47.
\(^{34}\) Here, I am relying on the concept of the interconnected textual universe, which
is possible under Conte’s model (Conte, \textit{The Rhetoric of Imitation}, see above),
Seneca is obliquely referring to Virgil’s garden instead of Epicurus’, whom he frequently cites, particularly in the first three books.35 Seneca then, seemingly tangentially, recounts two theories on the production of honey, substantiating the connection with the *Georgics*. The first is that there is already honey on the flowers and the bees simply gather it. The second is that they change what they have gathered by combining it with their own breath: *quae collegerunt, in hunc saporem mixtura quadam et proprietate spiritus sui mutent* (‘that which they have collected, they change into this flavour by a certain mixing process and with a property of their own breath’).36 Seneca’s digression produces some honey of its own. He concludes that bees collect materials from different flowers and transform them into an altogether different product:

> quidam existimant conditura et dispositione in hanc qualitatem uerti, quae ex tenerrimis uirentium florentiumque decerpserint, non sine quodam, ut ita, dicam, fermento, quo in unum diversa coalescunt.37

Some think that that material which they have gathered from the very delicate blooms and flowers is turned into this state [i.e. honey] by preservation and management, and not without that something else, as I shall call it, fermentation, by which the diverse [elements] coalesce into one.

By beginning with the idea that we ought to copy bees (*apes ... debemus imitari*), Seneca is commenting on the art of literary production. A writer must venture out, collect nectar from their readings, return to their hive and mix it with their own breath, or more correctly, their own *spiritus*, a word which was commonly associated with the human soul and the divine inspiration of poetry.38

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35 Anna Motto and John Clark, “Paradoxum Senecae”: The Epicurean Stoic*, *The Classical World* 62 (1968): 40 n27, note that ‘Epicurus is mentioned, defended, and/or quoted outright in twenty seven of the first thirty three epistles; often he is cited more than once in a single letter.’ They also show in their tabulations of references to philosophers that Epicurus is by far the most frequently cited by Seneca (sixty four times), the second most commonly referred to philosopher in the *Epistulae* is Socrates (forty-nine times): Motto and Clark, ‘Paradoxum Senecae’, 39. Cf. John Henderson, ‘Journey of a Lifetime: Seneca, *Epistle 57* in Book VI in EM’, in *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics*, ed. Katharina Volk and Gareth Williams (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 130.

36 Sen. *Ep*. 84.4


38 For the inspiration of poetry see Cic. *Arch*. 18; Hor. *Carm*. 2.16.38; Livy 4.6.29.
Seneca has just demonstrated his ability to journey out into the wide world of literature, collect poetic pollen and bring it back to the metaphorical hive of the mind. But is not enough. The distillery of the mind must refine and reprocess it to create a substance quite distinct from its origins:

adhibita ingenii nostri cura et facultate, in unum saporem uaria illa libamenta confundere, ut etiam si apparuerit unde sumptum sit, aliud tamen esse quam unde sumptum est appareat.

by using our care and the skill of our natural talents, we should mix those various liquids into one flavour, so that even if it shows its origins, nevertheless, it shows itself to be something different from the original source.

Seneca appropriates Virgil and (re)processes his words for his own ends (just as Virgil had done with his own words). So, for Seneca, all thought is a (re)construction in two stages: accumulation and concentration. Philosophy is not a matter of reprocessing previous philosophers, but incorporating nectar collected from sources outside philosophy into the mixture. Seneca reiterates this message of processing with another metaphor, this time of digestion: food cannot nourish the body unless it is absorbed. This process of digestion (concoquere), distillation (redigere), and mixing (coalescere), ensures that the final product is not a dull, lifeless copy of its sources. A true copy (imago), Seneca writes, stamps its own form upon all the features which it has drawn

39 Richard Tarrant, ‘Seeing Seneca Whole?’ in Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics, ed. Katharina Volk and Gareth Williams (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2006), 2-3. Tarrant observes this phenomenon with Seneca’s quotation of Virgil and Ovid in some of Seneca’s Epistulae but without reference to this particular letter: ‘In the prose works, correspondingly strong readings of Virgil and Ovid often take the form of imposing a sense quite foreign to that of the original ... In such cases Seneca is not being merely perverse or insensitive, but is instead making the cited material his own by appropriating it for a new use’.

40 Ingienium, like spiritus, often carries connotations of poetic inspiration. Prop. 2.30.40: nam sine te nostrum non uael ingenium (‘For without you, my genius does not thrive’). Ovid Tris. 2.424: Ennus ingenio maximus, arte rudis (‘Ennus, great in genius, unpolished in art’).

41 Sen. Ep. 84.5.

42 ibid., 84.6 f.

43 ibid., 84.7.

44 ibid., 84.2.

45 ibid., 84.4.
from ‘the original’, in such a way that they fold into a seamless unity.46

**Entropy and Colony Collapse Disorder: the case of Aristaeus’ Bees**

The fact that Seneca quotes the *Aeneid* rather than synthesising it enables us to trace the source of the quotation. This is exactly what Seneca has been telling his reader a well-mixed work should not do: it should not give away its sources, but it may show resemblance in the same way a son resembles his father.47 We must then ask, why does Seneca go against his own advice and quote Virgil? I shall argue that it stands as a conspicuous signpost pointing to the process of integration rather than the end product. What is interesting about this process is that it may not be as simple or harmonious as Seneca purports it to be in *Epistula* 84. Moreover, some of the images which Seneca makes use of in *Epistula* 84 are found also in his *Quaestiones Naturales*. The bee metaphor in the *Aeneid* is a further use of an idea from Virgil’s *Georgics*. I will therefore discuss the extent to which Virgil’s *Georgics* and Seneca’s own *Quaestiones Naturales* can help us to understand more fully the dynamic of this epistle.

Ferry in the introduction to his translation of Virgil’s *Georgics* writes: ‘[c]ulture, in the fallen world of Jupiter, is always near the fragile beginnings of its making and always near its potential end’.48 This is important to keep in mind when reading the story of Aristaeus and his bees. The lapsarian world is the crucial backdrop of Virgil’s *Georgics*. The bee society in the *Georgics* resembles, at first, the pre-lapsarian Golden Age described in Book 1, where everything is communal and centralised.49 However, this idyllic image is disrupted by the temperament of the bees. They are naturally bellicose, greedy (*amor … habendi*),50 and desire glory from producing honey (*tantus amor flororum et generandi gloria* 46

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46 ibid., 84.8. Seneca also uses the idea of a chorus to represent this idea of many different things combining to create something new, ibid., 84.9 f.
47 ibid., 84.7-8.
49 Verg. G. 4.156 f. *uenturaeque hiemis memores aestate laborem | experiuntur et in medium quaestita reponunt* (‘and mindful of the coming winter, they undergo work in the summer and what has been acquired is placed in the centre [i.e. is shared]’).
50 ibid., 4.177.
mellis). This description evokes ideas about human society, and, because they would become famous enemies of Rome, it dovetails well with the image of the Carthaginians at work when Aeneas approaches.

Seneca, in the letter addressed to the young Nero, writes that Nature gives human beings an example of the best kind of society in the form of bees. In *De clementia* Seneca takes the society of bees to be intimating a natural law which ought to be followed by human societies also. In *Epistula* 84 the behaviour of bees as an exemplum for human actions works in a similar fashion to the image in *de Clementia*, in that it demonstrates nature’s way of doing things. In *de Clementia* the aim is to show that kingship occurs in nature, but in *Epistula* 84 the reader is supposed to aim to emulate this behaviour. In both cases bees act as a symbol of a larger natural law. In Stoic physics the cosmos is often described as a whole, a unity, which is constituted by interconnected parts. Seneca describes the universe as deus: *totum hoc, quo continemur, et unum est et deus; et socii sumus eius et membra* (‘[a]ll of this, by which we are enclosed, is both a unity and deus; we are both associates and limbs of the deus’). Like Virgil’s beehive, each man exists within the cosmos and contributes to its continuity and survival: each bee is an associate and limb of the beehive. Inspired by the social structure of bees, Virgil waxes philosophical:

his quidam signis atque haec exempla securi
esse apibus partem diuinae mentis et haustus

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51 Ibid., 4.205.
52 Cf. Peter Davis, ‘Vergil’s *Georgics* and the Pastoral Ideal’, *Ramus* 8 (1979): 29. Davis, ‘Vergil’s *Georgics*’, 30: argues that the bees are different from human beings in that human beings value individual immortality over the survival of the collective.
57 Sen. *Clem*. 1.19.3 *documentum*; *Ep*. 84. In *Epistle* 84 this is strengthened by the images of digestion and of likeness between fathers and sons, both of which occur naturally and, one could state further, in accordance with the natural law.
58 *Diog. Laert.*, 7.140.
aetherios dixere; deum namque ire per omnis
terrasque tractusque maris caelumque profundum;
hinc pecudes, armenta, uiros, genus omne ferarum,
quemque sibi tenuis nascentem arcessere uitas:
scilicet huc reddi deinde ac resoluta referri
omnia, nec morti esse locum, sed uiua ulare
sideris in numerum atque alto succedere caelo.\footnote{60}

Based on certain signs and with respect to these examples some have said
that a part of the divine mind is obeyed by the bees and that they draw upon
the aetherial flames; for deus permeates everything: geographic and oceanic
regions, and the soaring sky; sheep, herds, men, every kind of beast, each
receives a delicate trickle of life from him: and, as we know, thence everything
returns and is dissolved, there is no room for death, but life dashes toward the
countless stars and continues on in the depths of the cosmos.

Bees are microcosms of the macrocosm, partaking in the order of divine unity.
Seneca’s citation of Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid} conjures up the \textit{Georgics}, which reminds
the reader that the universe is an interconnected whole. Intertextuality is based
on the same principle. By analogy with bees, each author ventures out into
the textual universe, gathering nectar and pollen from textual flowers, before
refining and condensing it into a new text.

For Seneca, like most Stoics, the universe is a whole comprising of parts which
are held together by tension (\textit{intentio}):

\begin{quote}
hunc [aerem] quidam ex distantibus corpusculis, ut puluerem, struunt pluri-
mumque a uero recedunt. numquam enim nisi contexti per unitatem corporis
nisus est, cum partes consentire ad intentionem debeant et conferre uires.\footnote{61}
\end{quote}

Some construe that this [the atmosphere] is made up of separate little bodies,
like dust, but they are very far from the truth. For there can never be exertion
of a body unless the body is held together by unity, since the parts ought to
work together and to assemble their strength for a state of physical tension.

Moreover, Seneca is \textquote{[s]toic enough by habit to draw little or no distinction
between spiritual, moral and material realities ... he treats \textit{all} phenomena as

\footnote{60}{Verg. \textit{G.} 4.219-27}
\footnote{61}{Sen. \textit{Q Nat.} 2.6.2.}
belonging to the same order of being’.\textsuperscript{62} The Senecan model of the universe is biological, almost chemical:\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{quote}

siue animal est mundus, siue corpus natura gubernabile, ut arbores, ut sata, ab initio eius usque ad exitum quicquid facere quicquid pati debat, inclusum est.\textsuperscript{64}

\end{quote}

Whether the universe is an animal, or whether it is a body controlled by nature, as with respect to trees and other things which are grown, from their beginning up until their end, whatever it ought to do or undergo is already included in it.

Given the fact that Seneca rejects the notion of void and substance and instead says that air in tension holds the universe together,\textsuperscript{65} the biological metaphor gains even more credence. Everything is held together by the \textit{intentio} of the air which encompasses it.\textsuperscript{66} Because everything is interconnected, one event affects everything, like a great ripple on a pond. The idea of \textit{intentio} is important for the way in which we read Seneca’s bee metaphor. As Robert Coleman recognised, Seneca’s metaphors do not simply function as metaphor, but exploit the possibilities of both the tenor and the vehicle at the same time.\textsuperscript{67} This effectively means that language itself ceases to be a harmless haphazard description of the world, but an active force within and upon it.

Virgil’s bees, however, are not an ideal example of the harmony of the cosmos: in the \textit{Georgics} the bees fall sick. The bees in Book 4 show signs of illness: ‘their bodies droop with a painful disease’ (\textit{tristi languebunt corpora morbo}).\textsuperscript{68} They change colour,\textsuperscript{69} become emaciated,\textsuperscript{70} and are hungry and cold.\textsuperscript{71} Virgil lists ways to alleviate these symptoms, such as herbal fumes.\textsuperscript{72} Unlike the

\begin{footnotesize}


\textsuperscript{63} Thomas Rosenmeyer, \textit{Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 100 f.

\textsuperscript{64} Sen. \textit{Q Nat.} 3.29.2.

\textsuperscript{65} ibid., 2.7.2.

\textsuperscript{66} ibid., 2.6.6.


\textsuperscript{69} Verg. G. 4.252.

\textsuperscript{70} ibid., 4.252-5.

\textsuperscript{71} ibid., 4.259.

\textsuperscript{72} ibid., 4.264-80.

\end{footnotesize}
plague, there is some hope for recovery; however, without the usual warning signs,73 a whole stock of bees can die suddenly: *sed siquem proles subito defecerit omnis* (‘but if he [the bee keeper] should lose the whole race suddenly ... ’).74 It is important that we look at what else Virgil’s bees might be carrying apart from nectar. Book 3 of the *Georgics* closes on a harrowing note: plague.75 Virgil opens his description of diseases with two curable diseases in sheep.76 Yet, if a herdsman should notice that one of his flock often withdraws to the shade, is not eating well or seems to be fatigued he should kill it immediately to prevent it from infecting the rest of the flock.77 The lines *sed siquem proles subito defecerit omnis | nec genus unde nouae stirpis reuocetur habebit* (‘but if he should lose the whole race suddenly then he will not have somewhere from which a race of new stock can be recovered’) recall the death of the livestock, where the destruction is total.78

*nec singula morbi*
*corpora corripiunt, sed tota aestiua repente*
*spemque gregemque simul cunctamque ab origine gentem.*79

Nor do sicknesses snatch single bodies, but suddenly they seize the whole grazing pasture, take away hope and the herd at the same time, and carry off the entire flock from its beginning.

If the cause of this sudden death is the sickness in lines 4.251 f., the expression of those lines is significant: *si uero, quoniam casus apibus quoque nostros | uita tulit, tristi languebant corpora morbo* (‘since life has carried our misfortunes to the bees also, their bodies droop with a painful disease’). As Thomas points out, the protasis lacks an apodosis.80 He further goes on to speculate that the expected apodosis would have been ways to cure this disease (‘if the bees fall sick, then you should do the following’); the absence of an apodosis may very well connote the absence of a cure.81 The remedies Virgil describes may only

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73 Cf. ibid., 4.253.
74 ibid., 4.281.
75 ibid., 3.440-565.
76 ibid., 3.440-63.
77 ibid., 3.464-9; Cf. Varro, *R.R.* 2.2.6, 2.4.5.
78 Verg. *G.* 2.281 f.
81 ibid.
alleviate the symptoms. The disease can be forestalled with remedies, but at its most vicious it can kill suddenly.

This sudden death is the case for Aristaeus’ bees. Modern apiarists have similarly witnessed an alarming increase in unexplainable deaths of whole colonies of bees and refer to this phenomenon as Colony Collapse Disorder. Just as in the modern world, the sudden disappearance of whole colonies of bees is a disconcerting occurrence (sed si quem proles subito defecerit omnis). This suggests that there was no time to implement the remedies which Virgil had prescribed earlier. This is a serious exemplum, part and parcel of a universe governed by intentio.

Seneca reaches through Virgil to touch upon some Stoic home truths. Epistula 84, upon first reading, takes a positive tone toward learning, insisting that a writer should synthesise what he reads so that no single source is identifiable. He breaks this himself, by quoting Virgil’s Aeneid which is a partial quote of Virgil’s Georgics. The lack of integration of the Aeneid quote allows the reader to trace the source and consider the context from which the quotation is taken. The contexts of both the Aeneid quote and the Georgics passage bring an awareness of looming death and destruction. The tragedy of Aristaeus’ bees is invoked on the periphery of the reader’s consciousness by Seneca’s quotation of the Aeneid, which more directly evokes the destruction of Carthage. Just as Aristaeus’ bees see their civilisation collapse, so too do the Carthaginians. The epistle preaches synthesis of material but fails to synthesise Virgil’s metaphor. The consequence of this failure is the contamination of the epistle with ideas from the Aeneid and the Georgics.

Lurking in the compounded honey is a trace of unpleasantness. This unpleasantness looms like knowledge of the apocalypse. Rosenmeyer writes that:

In Seneca’s prose writings, suggestions of cosmic disorder are in the minority … the implications of Stoic cosmology are blunted by the overriding need to discover, within a labile universe, the fixed position that will enable man to live at relative peace with himself.

82 Verg. G. 4.281.
84 Verg. G. 4.281.
85 Verg. Aen. 1.432 f.; G. 4.163 f.
86 Rosenmeyer, Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology, 105.
However, this does not give enough credit to the philosophical pupil of the prose works. A conscientious reader, who understands what Seneca is saying about synthesis, should be struck by the imposition of the quotation and trace its source back to the *Aeneid* and then all the way back to the *Georgics*. Moreover, the continuity between *Quaestiones Naturales* and this epistle leads to the knowledge that the universe is born to die in a paroxysm of cosmic chaos. Rosenmeyer points out this theme in the tragedies:

> It is as if nature in all its functions had catastrophe embedded in it. A proper vision of that nature can only be an apocalyptic one. It casts a shadow over even the most sanguine homilies of consolation and encouragement.\(^87\)

Rosenmeyer is wrong to think that the prose works entirely blunt the implications of the Stoic cosmology. True, Seneca mutes them, but this very muteness is exercising the pupil’s ability to confront the logical conclusions of Seneca’s philosophy.

The destructions of Carthage and of Aristaeus’ bees contaminate Seneca’s letter with death. By the power of *intention* and infection, the philosopher’s letter is contaminated by the first traces of this universal disease. Seneca posits in *Epistula* 84 that the ideal philosophical mind is one which is multidisciplinary, has many principles and is versed in the *exempla* of many epochs of history.\(^88\) But this kind of mind has the ability to comprehend the apocalyptic essence encoded in nature. All nature is subject to ‘Cosmic Collapse Disorder’. Seneca, toward the end of the letter refuses to press this point. He returns to ethics, stating that in comparison to the greater universe, human greed seems pitiful. The didactic point is paramount here. It is precisely the ‘unsaid’ that matters, what is left to be traced back to the source and inductively extrapolated.

The letter ends with a feeling of closure caused by its circular composition—we have travelled back to the idea of a journey. However, the infection which Seneca picked up from Virgil and his own *Quaestiones Naturales* does not disappear. The philosopher-pupil is encouraged by Ratio herself to abandon those things which make a person run about, wealth, pleasures of the body and mind, and finally to abandon ambition.\(^89\) The repeated imperative (*relinque*) commands the pupil to let go of many earthly ties. Ratio then orders the pupil to continue

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\(^87\) ibid., 149.

\(^88\) Sen. *Ep.* 84.10.

\(^89\) Sen. *Ep.* 84.11.
travelling past the houses of rich men. The aim is to obtain a perspective which looks down upon normal human affairs, putting them into the larger context:

omnia quidem sub te, quae pro excelsissimis habentur, aspicies, sed tamen uenies ad summa per planum. uale.

All of those things, which men regard as the most lofty, you will see beneath you, but nevertheless you can reach the highest point over level ground. Good bye.

The reader of the Quaestiones Naturales knows that this perspective is one which comprehends how insignificant the human being is in relation to the universe, but moreover, how the universe itself functions: namely, that one day it too, just like every living thing, will perish.

Senecan hermeneutics is based on the principal of intentio, and it is vitally important that the reader recognises the value of intertextuality in Seneca’s Epistulae. Although Seneca requests that whatever the reader reads ought to be synthesised in his writing, he nevertheless opens up pathways for the reader to investigate the nature of the interconnected textual universe through quotation and allusion. Yet, his own work, too, cannot be ignored. Universal destruction, such an important theme in the Quaestiones Naturales, is intimated in this letter through allusion and intentio. By taking the idea of intentio to its logical extreme, Seneca ‘mutes’ the theme of universal destruction in this letter, but nevertheless it creeps in, unbidden, by virtue of the interconnected textual universe.

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90 ibid., 84.12.
91 ibid., 84.13.