
Stefano Costa’s ‘Quod Olim Fuerat’ is a massive study of the representation of the past in a selection of Seneca’s prose. It is an important addition to modern scholarship, even though the author chooses to omit both De Clementia and De Brevitate Vitae from his analysis, two crucial works containing fundamental information about time and memory. Costa’s focus is not philosophical, and he does not assess the specificity of the philosophical lore at stake, nor give any emphasis to possible theoretical debts to previous philosophical traditions. Rather, his study is more like an overview that takes into consideration a variety of significant passages, often bringing them together for comparison in order to outline the many nuances of Seneca’s doctrine and, at times, the possible contradictions thereof.

The first two chapters are devoted to the consolations, specifically the Ad Marciam and the Ad Helviam. Chapter 3 and 4 deal with the De Tranquillitate. Chapter 5 and 6 tackle, respectively, the De Beneficiis and the Naturales Quaestiones. Chapter 7 and 8 contain an analysis of the Epistles, yet the author makes a very specific selection of a total of six letters (three per chapter): namely Epp. 90, 95 and 82 for chapter 7 and, for chapter 8, Epp. 87, 86, 55/51 (associating these last two epistles for the sake of his argument). Chapter 9 is devoted to the assessment of the nova exempla, i.e. the value and role of the exemplary deeds of characters from Seneca’s own time, and their relation, in terms of moral value and parenteral significance, to the examples of a more distant and sedimented past. A short conclusion presents a summation of the inquiry. A bibliography, index locorum, and index nominum make it easy for the reader to navigate through the volume.

In chapter 1, Costa suggests, the Ad Marciam presents the female addressee as bringer of the many good qualities of an idealized past, which largely coincides with republican Rome, and Marcia’s greatest merit consists in the fostering of her father Cremutius Cordo’s memory and works as a champion of liberty. The knowledge and the study of the past, with its merits, do not prevent the emerging of virtuous figures in the present. On the contrary, the fostering of virtue can be pursued even in modern times and Marcia, or Seneca’s mother and aunt in the Ad Helviam (chap. 2), stand as contemporary examples of moderation and good moral qualities.

In chapters 3-4, Costa turns to the De Tranquillitate by singling out two main orientations. He first focuses on those passages, particularly in Serenus’ proemial confession, where amor parsimoniae and frugalitas are presented as the very foundations of the mos maiorum. Next, he singles out three ages – Socratic, Catoian and the present – and three related historical figures – Socrates, Cato and Scipio. Costa contends that Seneca’s analysis appears to be fundamentally centered on the issue of the bonorum egestas, in that it shows how even the past had its share of deplorable men while, at the same time, the present era can still provide examples of genuine virtue, as is the case with I. Canus.

Turning in chapter 5 to the many issues presented by the De Beneficiis, Costa focuses mainly on the honores bestowed in Seneca’s own time upon undeserving
individuals, solely on account of lineage and glorious ancestry. A few negative examples are analyzed, among whom are Fabius Persicus, Caligula and Mamar-cus Scaurus. Costa poses the question of whether Seneca’s perspective may in fact conceal a substantial defense of the providential order, and briefly mentions how the overbearing presence of a glorious past, as a means of justifying a vile present, will eventually become a target for the following generation of satirists, Juvenal in primis.

The analysis in chapter 6 of the Naturales Quaestiones is particularly compelling and it is split into two sections: one dealing with scientific themes, the other with their moral implications. Ancient science is portrayed as rudimentary, if compared to the accomplishments of the present. Even so, the simpler nature of ancient theories worked as a didactic spur and an important encouragement for moral progress. Thus past times prove to be superior to the present. When it comes to the parts that Costa singles out as being more directly concerned with moral themes, the episodes of Hostius Quadra and Servilius Vatia epitomize, through the misuse of mirrors and food, how modern technical progress may indeed open a way to perversion. Yet, beyond these two examples adduced by Costa, the text of the Naturales is far more richly nuanced, and there are passages in which Seneca expresses trust in the positive outcome of scientific progress (though vices will always stand in the way). Costa labels Naturales 7 as the most pessimistic of the books, in which the issue of the lack of philosophical search is central and is presented as the cause not only of contemporary decline, but also of the inability to retain and treasure the teachings of the ancients.

In chapter 7, the author focuses on three epistles (90, 95 and 82) to outline what he calls «tracce di evoluzione morale». Ep. 90 tackles the central theme of the golden age and its relation with the artes. Very much in contrast with Posidonius, Seneca argues that the various artes were originally unknown, which also prevented the development of the luxury and the corruption that came along with them. According to Costa, Seneca seems to favor primitivism and looks at the past as an example of the uncorrupted life, yet striving to achieve sapientia through philosophical research is a positive, modern phenomenon, for philosophy is an ars and the artes define modernity. Ep. 95 tackles the centrality of praecepta and decreta. The trajectory outlined, similar to that of Ep. 95 itself, shows the progressive loss of ancient virtue and the advancement of modern vices. The past is endowed with a vetus sapientia (or a simplex virtus), which was apt to contain vita simplicia. The complexity of the modern moral crisis requires that philosophy integrate praecepta and decreta, in particular those decreta that the ancient exempla bring forth. Ep. 82 is about the necessity of overcoming the fear of death. Zeno’s syllogism proves not effective: philosophy’s outcome must be persuasion and not reasoning about quibbles. The examples of the Fabii, Leonidas and M. Calpurnius Flamma reveal the power of simplex virtus. The imagery of warfare also suggested by the mention of Attilius Regulus supports the ideal of a militant philosophical search, in line with the simplicity of old Roman ethics.

Chapter 8 turns to the trajectory from ancient virtues to contemporary vices, further analyzed through another selection of epistles examined in this order: 87, 86, 51/55. Costa shows that in Ep. 87, the figure of Cato again epitomizes the good old virtue. The theme is the highly desirable simplicity of one’s equipment
when traveling. Recalling that Cato used to ride a nag, Seneca refuses the super-
vacua riches that are a significant part of modern decadence. Five different syllog-
isms support Seneca’s argument while the relation between austerity and moral
excellency echoes motifs already present in Sallust and Livy. *Ep.* 86 is centered
on the figure of Scipio; his villa at Liternum, depicted as a fortress, is itself a
symbolic representation of the man’s moral strength. His voluntary exile and
comparison with Cato the younger provide the opportunity to debate the value
of republican libertas. Finally, Costa focuses on *Epistles* 55 and 51, in which
Servilius Vatia’s luxurious villa is contrasted with the simplicity of Scipio’s
abode. Servilius’ unnecessary amenities, from which he derives the reputation of
knowing how to live (*vivere scit*), hinder any true philosophical activity, and
ultimately moral progress. On the contrary Scipio, whose rustic attitude would
be judged as unfit (*nesciit vivere*), can devote himself to fruitful *otium*. Costa
ends the chapter by showing how this opposition between a virtuous past and a
corrupted present seems to be reassessed in *Ep.* 86. The hot springs of Bajae
managed to weaken even Hannibal, thus the negative effects of luxury and vice
can also be found in historical figures. Even some great champions of Roman
history, such as Caesar and Pompey, began to show signs of corruption, in paral-
lel with the republican institutions that were turning into a principate.

In chapter 9’s analysis of «nova exempla» Costa initially focuses on what he
terms «catene diacroniche» which is to say exempla from various ages that seem
to be considered equally valuable. He then chooses to analyze three letters in
particular: 24, 30 and 66. *Ep.* 24 pivots around the characters of Scaevola, Cato
the younger and Metellus Scipio Pius, who are all significant for their *contemptus
mortis*. Furthermore the Stoic doctrine of the cyclical recurrence of events makes
it plausible that the *nova exempla* may be as significant as the *vetera*, demon-
strated by Aufius Bassus in *Ep.* 30. By showing courage while truly facing death,
and not just through mere reasoning, he provided an *exemplum* worthy of the
very best of the old tradition. Similarly in *Ep.* 66, old Claranus, by overcoming
the weakness of his aged body, can also be considered exemplary.

Costa’s work is quite relevant for the quantity of passages carefully analyzed,
in which no major figures or significant passages are left out. Perhaps the main
quality of the work resides in showing the various nuances of Seneca’s approach
to history and his representation of the past, thus underlining the complexity and
variety of his literary work. Footnotes are abundant and detailed, as is customary
for continental European scholarship, and they provide the reader with a critical
overview of the major works available. Bibliography is abundant and, unlike too
many recent contributions, contains titles representative of all modern languages
and schools active in classical studies. Even though Costa, in his introduction,
explicitly states that it is not his purpose to provide a philosophical investigation
of the theme of ‘history’ in Seneca’s work, and that he is going to shirk, for in-
stance, the analysis of the *De Brevitate Vitae*, this cursory approach is the one
downfall of the book. Since Seneca develops his philosophical preaching in a
literary manner, omitting the philosophical dimension of his literary representa-
tion of the past is problematic, particularly since Costa’s work purports to rectify
some of the main theses of Maso’s 1999 book, which does try to point to some
definite philosophical conclusions. Costa’s volume is surgical and nuanced; it is a
fine philological achievement, yet some more substantial synthesis is needed. Perhaps, after such an otherwise brilliant volume, Costa could tackle the substantive philosophical synthesis in his next undertaking.

Schenectady (NY)

Tommaso Gazzarri


The volume under review, a collection edited by Dag N. Hasse and Amos Bertolacci, is the impressive outcome of a conference held in the summer of 2008 in the Villa Vigoni in Menaggio, Italy. It contains fifteen contributions to the study of the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin reception of some of Avicenna’s metaphysical doctrines.

The first contribution, Jules Janssens’ paper ‘Al-Lawkari’s Reception of Ibn Sinā’s Ilāhyyāt’, is a colourful example of the various ways in which post-Avicennian works may be exploited to further our understanding of Avicenna’s philosophy and the tradition it initiated.

While Janssens readily admits that al-Lawkari’s work Bayān al-haqq bi-dimān al-sīdq «clearly lacks originality» (23), he demonstrates that a careful reading of it may still not only shed light on the important question of how Avicenna’s more and less immediate disciples made use of, i.e., how they read, understood, and rearranged, their master’s works, but also accidentally forces us to reconsider the attribution of the Fusūl muntaza’a to al-Fārābī, and provides interesting, sometimes even unique, variant readings any future editor of Avicenna’s works ought to consider.

In ‘Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East’, Robert Wisnovsky goes in search of the precise target of a well-known attack by al-Suhrawardi on the «followers of the Peripatetics» who were criticised for holding the view that existence is something superadded to the quiddity of a thing (zā‘id ‘alā l-māhiya).

One would be tempted to understand this phrase simply as referring to al-Fārābī and Avicenna, as medieval and modern commentators usually did. Yet, Wisnovsky is suspicious and his suspicion eventually pays off. After an impressive ride through major developments concerning the issue of divine attributes as discussed among Muʿtazilī and Sunnī mutakallimūn of the 11th- and 12th-century, Wisnovsky states modestly that his analysis did «increase the likelihood» (46) of his initial hypothesis that al-Suhrawardi did not attack «Avicenna’s own ontology [but] an emerging Avicennian ontology» (29) which later mutakallimūn like Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were beginning to formulate precisely in response to those issues in Sunnī theology.

In his study ‘Fārābī in the Reception of Avicenna’s Metaphysics’, Stephen Menn describes with great precision the primary sources for Averroes’ critique of Avicenna’s use of mawḡūd («existent», «being») and wāḥid («one»).

These are shown to be two of al-Fārābī’s works: the Kitāb al-Ḥurūf and the Kitāb al-Wāḥid wa-l-wahda. Since Averroes drew extensively on these works of Avicenna’s predecessor, al-Fārābī — somewhat anachronistically — came to play an important role in the reception history of Avicenna’s metaphysics. One of the recurring themes in Menn’s paper is that Averroes criticises Avicenna’s conception of unity and being by means of argu-