

EPISTULA 86 ONCE AGAIN: AGRICULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY  
IN SENECA'S MORAL LETTERS

JAMES L. ZAINALDIN

*Werdend betrachte sie nun, wie nach und nach sich die Pflanze,  
stufenweise geführt, bildet zu Blüten und Frucht.*

—J. W. Goethe, *Versuch die Metamorphose der  
Pflanzen zu erklären*

1. INTRODUCTION: ALLEGORY AND AGRICULTURE IN EPISTULA 86

IN EPISTULA 86 (hereafter *Ep.*), we join Seneca for a trip to the villa of Scipio Africanus.<sup>1</sup> The letter bristles with moral exempla, some implicit, some explicit. The themes are *moderatio* and *pietas*, and the old “horror of Carthage” (*Carthaginis horror*, 86.5) left an impression of those merits on every stone of the villa he occupied after his voluntary exile from Rome. As we tour Scipio’s estate, we touch, see, and even smell the great man’s virtues that are still evident in the martial austerity of his home.<sup>2</sup> Then, in the last third of the letter, we turn abruptly away from Scipio and his villa and meet Aegialus, the current owner and proprietor of the estate.<sup>3</sup> During his visit Seneca has spoken with Aegialus, who taught him how one may “transplant a tree, no matter how old,” so as to make it productive again (*quamvis vetus arbustum posse transferri*, 86.14). The remainder of the letter (86.14–21) consists of instructions for transplanting olives and vines cast in the technical language of agriculture. This agricultural “digression,” for lack of a better term, can be divided into two parts: (1) the “outer frame” (86.14–16, 21), where we find preliminary remarks on the quality and relevance of Aegialus’ advice, a caution about Virgil’s *Georgics* as a source for agronomy, and a valediction in the form of a coy demurrer to share more with Lucilius; and (2) the transplanting instructions for the olive (86.17–19), and for the vines that are to be married to a new elm (86.20–21).

1. For previous treatment of the letter, see Summers 1910, 288–89; Tosi 1974–75, 220–22; Minarini 1997, 271–74; Henderson 2004, 53–61, 93–170; Gowing 2005, 80–81; Ker 2009, 346–53; Del Giovane 2012; Rimell 2013; 2015, 178–98. The text of Seneca’s *Epistulae morales* used in this article is from Reynolds 1965. All translations of Greek and Latin are my own, unless otherwise noted.

2. On the “overtly multisensual” experience of Seneca’s villa (Rimell 2013, 1), see esp. Rimell 2013 and 2015, 178–98; on smell in particular, see Rimell 2013, 8–10; 2015, 185–87.

3. It should be noted that Aegialus is not a fiction that Seneca has contrived for this letter: the vines he cultivated at Scipio’s villa were famous (Plin. *HN* 14.49), and a reader may well have recognized the name.

When we come to the agricultural digression of *Ep.* 86, we are not likely to be surprised by the sudden shift to what may seem an unrelated topic. This is because we have by now learned how to read allegorically: from the *Letters*, in general, where Seneca is adept at moralizing with language and images borrowed from practical pursuits familiar to his readers,<sup>4</sup> and from 86, in particular, where he has shown us how to extract lessons from the architectural clues of Scipio's villa. Some scenes are very familiar, such as the old man cultivating his crops not for himself but for his posterity (*nemo non olivetum alteri ponit*, 86.14).<sup>5</sup> Here, perhaps, is the teacher of moral philosophy and his pupil, in whom the master's efforts will come to fruition. The detailed techniques for transplanting that follow (86.17–21) also admit of allegorical interpretation. One obvious reading is to identify the tree or vine with the soul: no matter a person's age, it is never too late to prune the soul's vices and false beliefs (*≈ circumcisis ramis . . . amputatis radicibus*, 86.17), provide it with care and sustenance to grow anew (*≈ fimo tinctum*, and, 86.18, application of *pisatio* so as to exclude cold and wind), and introduce it to a new way of thinking, better, a new philosophical school (*≈ non suas ulmos* for the vine, 86.20). The soul so nourished will not fail to "strike new roots" (*radices exeunt novae*, 86.18; cf. 86.20, *radicescat*). Other, subtler, allegorical interpretations of 86.14–21 are available to us, as is amply demonstrated by a number of recent studies on the letter.<sup>6</sup> These studies have shown how adeptly Seneca can employ the imagery of agriculture to comment on a wide variety of topics philosophical, literary, historical, and otherwise.

In this article, I return to the "digression" of *Ep.* 86 in order to explore further how Seneca makes use of the discipline of agriculture and its language to reflect on the kind of philosophy and philosophical instruction that he espouses in the *Letters*. Although many of the *Letters* use agricultural metaphors as "props" (*adminicula*) for the reader's understanding,<sup>7</sup> the self-conscious and extended discussion of transplanting in 86.14–21, as well as a number of puzzles that it presents, makes it an ideal place for thinking through the relationship of agriculture to philosophy in general in Seneca's writings. I will offer three related perspectives on the interaction between agriculture and philosophy that emerge from this letter. Two of these readings (sections 2–3) will focus more narrowly on the themes and language of *Ep.* 86.14–21, arguing that we ought to understand certain surprising features of the letter as enacting and substantiating specific philosophical themes that run through the *Letters* as a whole. In the first of these (section 2), I argue that Seneca's comparison of the agricultural instructions of Aegialus and Virgil in the outer frame sheds light on the right kind of philosophical education.

4. For Seneca's metaphorical language and imagery, see concisely Summers 1910, lxxiii–iv, lxxvii–ix; Armisen-Marchetti 2015; and more fully, Steyns 1907; Smith 1910; Armisen-Marchetti 1989. For some remarks on the philosophical and didactic function of metaphors in the *Letters*, see section 4 below.

5. Powell 1988, 155: "The idea of planting trees for posterity is commonplace in ancient literature." See Powell 1988 for examples from Greek, Jewish, and Arabic sources. The thought first appears in Latin literature at Caecil. *com.* 210 (Ribbeck), *serit arbores, quae saeclo prosient* [P<sup>2</sup>, *rell. prosint*] *alteri* ("he sows trees which another generation shall enjoy"), quoted by Cicero at *Sen.* 24 and *Tusc.* 1.31.

6. See, e.g., what Ker (2006, 38) calls the "cryptic reading" of Henderson 2004, 119–38; more recently, the analyses of Rimell 2013, 12–18; 2015, 189–98.

7. The notion of metaphors as "props" (*adminicula*) comes from *Ep.* 59.6: see Bartsch 2009, 192–94, and further section 4 below.

In particular, Seneca's unusually critical attitude toward Virgil and his approval of Aegialus bring to the fore the central role of "autopsy" in philosophical instruction. Next (section 3), I take stock of the technical language of agriculture in the letter, and consider how, despite its difficulty, it models the kind of language that Seneca holds to be appropriate for philosophy—language that reveals the matter itself (*res*) and effects practical change in the pupil. In the final section (4), I consider the relationship between plants and humans and between agriculture and philosophy more broadly, arguing that Stoic physical doctrine justifies and grounds comparisons across these groups. Supposing that the Stoic theory implies a real, not figurative, symmetry among different natural beings (specifically among plants/animals/humans), we are in a position to set allegorical readings of agriculture and plant life in Seneca's *Letters* on a new footing.

## 2. AUTOPSY AND AGRICULTURAL INSTRUCTION

As Seneca often reminds Lucilius,<sup>8</sup> learning philosophy—*really* learning philosophy—is a matter of taking its lessons to heart and showing progress in one's actions (*res, opera*).<sup>9</sup> Words (*verba*) and subtle proofs are of little value here. They are not the end of philosophical instruction, and have even given philosophy a bad name: many Stoics and Peripatetics have devoted themselves to dialectical and linguistic refinements that do not so much conduce a pupil to a more virtuous life as make philosophy seem a petty and insignificant affair in the eyes of the many.<sup>10</sup> To cast aside the fear of death, to embrace wholesome poverty, to live with constancy and in agreement with Nature are the true marks of wisdom; it is where syllogisms give way to virtuous actions that philosophy begins to improve its practitioners and reveal its proper benefits. This is not to say that speech cannot serve philosophy: argument, exhortation, and *exempla* can turn the soul toward the pursuit of wisdom or shore up a faltering resolve; they can also purge persuasive false beliefs that have taken hold and delay the *proficiens*, replacing them with true ones. But if philosophy begins, in a certain sense, with speech, then it ends with going into the world and practicing what one believes.<sup>11</sup>

Seneca's approach to philosophic education—both his own and Lucilius'—in the *Letters* reflects the priority that he attributes to *res* over *verba*. As he emphasizes, the most effective education, that is, that which most deeply impresses its lesson upon the *proficiens*, comes not from words, but from the teacher who is engaged in the thing itself (*Ep.* 98.17–18):

hoc est, mi Lucili, philosophiam in opere discere et ad verum exerceri, videre quid homo prudens animi habeat contra mortem, contra dolorem, cum illa accedat, hic premat; quid

8. When I speak of "Lucilius" I bracket any historical figure and speak of him as a fiction standing in for "us," the readers and moral pupils of Seneca. On the figure of Lucilius, see Griffin 1976, 416–19; Inwood 2007a, 134–35; for a survey of positions on the correspondence, see Mazzoli 1989, 1846–50; Setaioli 2014, 193–94. The epistolary form occasioned by this fiction gives rise to a number of interesting interpretative questions: although many studies of the *Letters* touch on the point, see, e.g., Inwood 2007a (esp. on philosophical precedents); Edwards 2015; Williams 2015, 135–37.

9. Cf. *Ep.* 16.3, 20.2, 24.15, 75.4–7, 82.19–24, 108.35–38, 109.17–18, 111, 115.18, 117.20–33.

10. Cf. *Ep.* 45.5–13, 48.4–7, 49.5–7, 58.5, 71.6, 102.20, 106.12, 108.5–8.

11. On the themes considered in this paragraph, cf., e.g., Cooper 2004, chap. 12 (building on the fundamental Hadot 1969); tempered by Inwood 2007b, xv–xvi.

faciendum sit a faciente discendum est. [. . .] quid opus est verbis? in rem praesentem eamus.<sup>12</sup>

This, Lucilius, is what it means to learn philosophy through action and to exercise oneself to the standard of truth: observe with what kind of spirit the prudent man faces death or pain, when the one draws near and the other afflicts him. We ought to learn what is to be done from the one who does it. . . . What need do we have of words? Let us go to meet the thing itself.

The position so cogently stated here is repeated elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> and is developed in the course of the *Letters* into what could schematically be called an educational theory of “autopsy.”<sup>14</sup> Words are persuasive up to a point, but it is witnessing the thing itself that has real effect: *eum elige adiutorem quem magis admireris cum videris quam cum audieris* (“choose the helper you may admire more when you see than hear him,” *Ep.* 52.8). The value of autopsy springs naturally from the superiority of practice to theory: because the practice of virtue is the real fruit of philosophy, virtuous actions are ipso facto a truer guide than words. Familiar injunctions (“despise death”) obtain greater conviction when uttered by someone who acts upon them. If you want to know what it is not to fear death, go behold the person who in dying scorns it (thus *Ep.* 30). Philosophy “happens” in action, and to learn what it is one must go out into the world and see it for oneself. Seneca’s approach to educating Lucilius in the *Letters* reflects his commitment to the value of autopsy: besides encouraging Lucilius to go out and see what it is he must do, Seneca also brings the world into the *Letters* by way of metaphors and *exempla* that present to the mind vivid images of what he hopes to teach.

The outer frame of the digression in *Ep.* 86 (14–16) articulates the value of autopsy in philosophical education through self-conscious reflection on the right kind of agricultural instruction. The issue is dramatized in particular in the interaction of Aegialus and Virgil, who are introduced at the outset of the digression as agronomic authorities. As Seneca turns away from the grounds of Scipio’s villa, we meet Aegialus (86.14):

haec si tibi nimium tristia videbuntur, villae inputabis, in qua didici ab Aegialo, diligentissimo patre familiae (is enim nunc huius agri possessor est) quamvis vetus arbustum posse transferri.

If all this seems too melancholy to you, you will chalk it up to the villa, where I learned from Aegialus, an extremely diligent *paterfamilias* (he is the owner of this land now, you see), that a tree, however aged, may be transplanted.

The first thing we may notice is how Seneca adopts the role of pupil and puts Aegialus in the place of the teacher. Learning (*discere*) distinguishes the pupil,

12. The idiom *in rem praesentem*, which means “to the place or situation in question, to the actual spot or scene” (*OLD*, s.v. 11b), is often also used of the power of speech or writing to transport the auditor in his or her imagination to the scene that is described: cf. Cic. *De or.* 1.250; Quint. *Inst.* 4.2.123; Plin. *Ep.* 3.9.26. It is a favored idiom of Seneca: cf. *Dial.* 4.36.1; *Ben.* 4.35.2; *Ep.* 6.5, 30.15, 66.35, 98.18. See also Bartsch 2009, 192–93.

13. Cf. *Ep.* 6.5–6, 30.7, 30.15, 52.8, 102.30, 120.8–12, 120.19.

14. I adopt—but also repurpose and greatly extend—the term “autopsy” from Bartsch (2009, 192).

just as teaching (*docere*) distinguishes the instructor.<sup>15</sup> Seneca now learns from Aegialus in order to instruct Lucilius, enacting (as often in the *Letters*) the programmatic statement of *Ep.* 6.4: *aliquid gaudeo discere, ut doceam* (“I am glad to learn something, so that I may teach it”). The figurative symmetry of teachers between agriculture and philosophy (Aegialus : Seneca :: Seneca : Lucilius) sets up an implicit analogy between the disciplines.<sup>16</sup> It also suggests that our theme is education, an inkling that will be confirmed as the digression proceeds. Nor is the language that Seneca uses to describe Aegialus, whom he calls a *diligentissimus paterfamilias*, insignificant. The epithet *diligens* is one of the standard ways for the agronomists to describe the good farmer, and the *iunctura* with *paterfamilias* in particular denotes the ideal farm-owner, someone who is prudent, assiduous, and at pains to maximize his yield, even if he must incur more work to do so.<sup>17</sup> The title *diligentissimus paterfamilias* thus strongly signals Seneca’s trust in Aegialus and establishes him as a reliable source of agricultural knowledge.

The idea of education first introduced by *didici* is elaborated in the following lines (cf. 86.14, *discere*; 15, *docere*), where Virgil is introduced and implicitly contrasted with Aegialus (86.14–15):

hoc nobis senibus discere necessarium est, quorum nemo non olivetum alteri ponit, †quod  
vidi illud arborum trimum et quadrimum fastidiendi fructus aut deponere.† te quoque  
proteget illa quae

tarda venit seris factura nepotibus umbram,

ut ait Vergilius noster [*apud G.* 2.58], qui non quid verissime sed quid decentissime diceretur  
aspexit, nec agricolas docere voluit sed legentes delectare.

We old men, none of whom is not sowing an olive grove for another, must learn this [. . .].<sup>18</sup>  
That [sc. tree] will protect you, too, which

late-coming shall throw its shade o’er thy distant posterity,

15. For the thematic opposition or pairing of the terms *discere/docere* in the *Letters*, cf. *Ep.* 7.5, 7.8, 39.1, 47.6, 88.11, 108.3.

16. The underpinning for this analogy is discussed in greater detail in section 4 below.

17. Cf. Columella *Rust.* 1.1.3 (text Rodgers 2010): *itaque diligens pater familiae, cui cordi est ex agri cultu certam sequi rationem rei familiaris augendae, maxime curabit ut et aetatis suae prudentissimos agricolos de quaque re consulat et commentarios antiquorum sedulo scrutetur atque aestimet*, etc. (“and so the diligent *paterfamilias*, who is concerned to obtain a sure means of maximizing his wealth from agriculture, will especially take care that he obtains advice on each matter from the most prudent farmers of his day, and that he scrupulously consults and appraises the commentaries of past generations, etc.”). Henderson (2002, 124) calls the *diligens paterfamilias* a “fetish fantasy” of the agricultural authors.

18. The corrupt text admits of no certain emendation. Fantham (2010, 296) offers as a “stopgap” the translation “and I saw that an example of three- or four-year-old trees with contemptible fruit could resume producing” (160), which is about what Gummere (1920, 319) gives in the Loeb; cf. also Henderson 2004, 122. As a referee pointed out, however, why should three- or four-year-old trees be worn out? Summers (1910, 104–5) tries a different way of fixing the text: *tu vide illud, <an> arborem trimam et quadrimam, fastidiendi fructus aut <exigui, sit tanti> deponere*, which he translates, “you may consider if ‘tis worth your while to adopt transplanting, with its obvious drawbacks (rather than sow).” The least radical conjecture that will give good sense is probably Erasmus’ *haud* or Madvig’s *non* before *fastidiendi*, which will mean that Seneca has seen even young trees bearing considerable fruit when propagated according to Aegialus’ method. As the same referee observes, this conclusion is germane for “us old men” (*senibus*) who do not have the time to wait for a tree to grow up from seed.

as our Virgil says, who sought not what might be said most truthfully, but what might be said most beautifully, for he wished not to teach farmers, but to delight readers.

The corruption of the passage does not let us identify what “this” (*hoc*) is that old men must learn, but the point of the Virgil citation is almost certainly to contrast the slow growth of trees planted out from seeds, a method which Seneca takes Virgil to espouse, with Aegialus’ own swifter technique of transplanting.<sup>19</sup> This specific criticism prompts Seneca to claim that Virgil’s advice is more generally suspect because, as he says, the poet wrote *decentissime*, not *verissime*, and in order to *delectare*, not *docere*. To substantiate this claim, Seneca adds that he has found many places where Virgil’s commitment to pleasing, rather than teaching, has led him astray in agricultural matters, but “to pass over all the other examples” (*nam ut alia omnia transeam*, 86.16) he will give Lucilius only one example à propos of his trip to Scipio’s villa: this very day in late June he has seen farmers reaping beans and sowing millet (*eodem die vidi fabam metentes, milium serentes*), contradicting Virgil’s advice (*G.* 1.215–16) that both crops be sown in the spring.<sup>20</sup>

Contrasting the pleasure toward which poets aim with the ends of instruction may be a commonplace,<sup>21</sup> but we should not dismiss Seneca’s criticism of Virgil out of hand as a mere *topos*. In the first place, Seneca elsewhere in the *Letters* treats Virgil with affection and respect, citing his poetry sometimes for its elegant imagery, sometimes for what he takes to be the fundamental truth of its words.<sup>22</sup> (On one memorable occasion, *Ep.* 108.23–29, Virgil is even handled as a sort of philosophical authority whose poetry has been corrupted by the philologists.) Seneca indeed signals his basic goodwill toward Virgil here with the affectionate *noster* (“our dear friend”), which softens the critical tone of what follows, but it is nevertheless remarkable that he criticizes Virgil so explicitly at all. In light of his usual practice of harmonious appropriation, Seneca’s attitude here should give us pause.

Another reason for taking Seneca’s criticism of Virgil in earnest is the existence of an ancient tradition of agricultural commentators who found fault with Virgil for compromising on complete veracity in order to achieve poetic effect.<sup>23</sup> Modern interpreters have long since lost interest in bringing Virgil to account for agricultural inaccuracies,<sup>24</sup> but this should not obscure the fact that

19. See Spurr 1986, 165. If this is in fact Seneca’s point, then it seems that we must admit that he is guilty of distorting Virgil, since Virgil in fact claims that fruit trees ought *not* be planted out from seed, because this method is excessively slow, but that they should rather be started from cuttings (see Spurr 1986, 166).

20. White (1970, 39, 41) seems to affirm Seneca’s critique, but see more subtly on the point Spurr 1986, 166.

21. A referee calls attention to Cic. *Fin.* 1.72, Hor. *Ars* 333–34, and Sen. *Ep.* 121.2, amid a sea of possible references.

22. See Mazzoli 1970, 215–32; Coleman 1974, 280–81; Motto and Clark 1993, 125–32; Ker 2015, 113–14. Relevant too is Seneca’s observation (*Ep.* 108.9–12) that what is said in verse sticks better than in prose.

23. This practice is still evident in the modern period with Jethro Tull’s vigorous attack on Virgilian agronomy: see Wilkinson 1969, 307–8; White 1973, 488.

24. This has been the case since commentators have urged that the *Georgics* should be treated as a literary artifact, not an agricultural handbook: see Putnam 1979, 3–16; Spurr 1986, 164–65; cf. also Wilkinson 1950; 1969, 3–14; 1982, 322–23; Thomas 1987, 229–32, 244–46.



in Roman antiquity the agronomists who followed him often took the didactic ambitions of the *Georgics* seriously<sup>25</sup> and found that, by correcting or questioning the quality of Virgil's instruction, they could display the superiority of or highlight certain aspects of their own method. Pliny the Elder, for example, found Virgil's poetry at odds with "thoroughness,"<sup>26</sup> and while Columella would not be apt to agree, his own "georgic" in Book 10 of the *De re rustica* offers a model for putting detailed agricultural instruction into poetry that is quite different from Virgil's.<sup>27</sup> While some scholars have criticized Seneca's condemnation of Virgil as an agricultural guide by arguing that his own advice is no more accurate,<sup>28</sup> our attention should be directed rather to the question of why Seneca has decided to criticize him here: What does he aim to achieve?

It may be thought that the vocabulary of pleasure (cf. *delectare*) alludes to Virgil's Epicureanism, thus implicitly suggesting that his philosophical commitment to the pleasant has led him astray in his instruction. A more plausible explanation, however, can be found in the educational "doctrine" of autopsy sketched above. Virgil's agricultural instruction is compared unfavorably to that of Aegialus in order to make a specific point about the right way of learning the discipline: namely, that the truth must be had from the teacher who is engaged in the very business of what he propounds. Just as philosophy is best learned from those who demonstrate their principles by their actions, agriculture is best learned from the farmers whose produce attests to the efficacy of their method. (In point of fact, the direction of the analogy is reversed in *Ep.* 86.) And who better to teach the cultivation of olives and vines than the *diligens paterfamilias* Aegialus, whose farm is famous across Italy?<sup>29</sup> When Seneca privileges Aegialus' advice, he draws a contrast between the authority of Virgil, which is constructed through the verbal medium of his poetry,<sup>30</sup> and that of Aegialus, which can be ascertained from the visible evidence of his farm. We would be wise to choose the teacher whose advice can be tested against his results (cf. *Ep.* 20.1: *verba rebus proba*; 24.15: *an vere audieris, an vere dixeris, effectu proba*).

The linguistic evidence of *Ep.* 86.14–16, and of the transplanting instructions more broadly (86.17–20), confirms that it is this issue of autopsy—learning from deeds rather than words—in which Seneca is interested when he distinguishes between Aegialus and Virgil as teachers of agriculture. In both places where Seneca criticizes Virgil's advice, first in the matter of planting (86.14–15) and next regard-

25. See Christmann 1982; also White 1970, 39 (who points to Plin. *HN* 18.300, *magno Vergilii praeconio* as a witness to Virgil's authority); Spurr 1986, 181–82. Virgil still figures in the agricultural writings of the third-century Latin agricultural author Gargilius Martialis (*Garg. Mart.* 4.1.1 in Zainaldin forthcoming = Condorelli 1978, 39), and in Palladius (but sparingly) in the sixth century (3.25.7).

26. In the words of Doody 2007, 193.

27. This in spite of his far-reaching Virgilian ambitions (Boldrer 1996, 15–22; White 2013, 30–46) and his claim to be humbly filling in Virgil's *Georgics* in order to repay a debt to his friend Silvinus (*G.* 4.147–48, with Columella *Rust.* 10.1–5). For a lively characterization of Columella's unique style, see Gowers 2000, 133–42.

28. See principally Spurr 1986; also Henderson 2004, 129–38; Doody 2007, 189. Others remain skeptical of Virgil's acumen: cf. André 1964, 11; White 1970, 40–41; Kolendo 1980, 16.

29. See n. 3 above.

30. Nor is it irrelevant that Virgil's goal *qua* poet is to please, as we have already suggested, since Seneca asserts that such a concern may be at odds with philosophical ends: *non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint* ("let our words not delight, but be of benefit," *Ep.* 75.5). See further section 3 below.

ing the proper time to reap beans and sow millet (86.16),<sup>31</sup> the first-person *vidi* is used to direct the reader to an alternate and superior authority. The verb highlights the important role that the evidence of sight, that is, autopsy, plays for Seneca in justifying his dissent from Virgil. Although the first *vidi* is mired in the corruption of 86.14, Seneca evidently calls the reader's attention there to his firsthand observation of the fruits of Aegialus' work, namely, the vigorous growth and production of fruit trees. The second *vidi* (86.16) identifies the unspecified subjects of *mententes* and *serentes* as practical authorities on the cultivation of cereal and legumes owing to their participation in the work. In both cases, Seneca's direct experience of farming is taken as the basis for criticizing Virgil and privileging the agricultural knowledge of Aegialus and his Italian colleagues. Reinforcing the epistemic value attached to sight in the outer frame, the verb *videre* continues to play an important role in Seneca's account of the instructions for transplanting (86.17–20). *Vidi* recurs three more times there, in each case framing the subject of discussion, first olives (86.17), then vines (86.20 *bis*). Sight remains throughout a crucial testimony to the efficacy of Aegialus' skill.

We will turn in a moment to the language of the agricultural digression (section 3), but it may be of use to briefly recapitulate the philosophical context and significance of the outer frame (86.14–16). As Seneca maintains in the *Letters*, philosophy's proper ambit is action, not speech. The aspiring philosopher's truest guide, therefore, is actions, which attest to and impress upon him the nature of the wisdom that he seeks. The interaction in 86.14–16 of Virgil and Aegialus as agricultural authorities, and the surprising criticism of Virgil, dramatize the role of autopsy in education, philosophical and otherwise. At the outset of the digression (86.14), Seneca establishes himself as a pupil to Aegialus in agronomy, mirroring the philosophical relationship between Seneca and Lucilius. In the following sections (86.15–16), Virgil is introduced as a possible third teacher who, with his *Georgics*, challenges Aegialus as an agricultural authority. Seneca's criticism and rejection of Virgil as a teacher in this sphere hinges on the value that he attaches to the firsthand observation, that is, autopsy, of the produce of Aegialus' farm: facts (*res, opera*), not words (*verba*), are taken as the standard for assessing agricultural knowledge. Insofar as the movement of the outer frame enacts Seneca's "theory" of autopsy, it also demonstrates and reinforces its importance to the doctrine of philosophical education in the *Letters* more generally.

### 3. AGRICULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL LANGUAGE

When Seneca turns from Aegialus and Virgil to the discussion of transplanting technique that he had promised (86.17–21), his language experiences a marked shift in register as it becomes replete with the terminology of agriculture. Agricultural language, like other varieties of technical language, had long been used in literary contexts in order to achieve specific ends.<sup>32</sup> While it may not be the whole story that "les langues techniques latines sont des langues

31. The relevant portion of 86.16 is quoted and set in context on p. 223 above.

32. The tradition is as old as Hesiod, but in artful Latin prose, one may start from, e.g., Cic. *Sen.* 51–60 or Varro's *De re rustica*.



réduites au lexique,”<sup>33</sup> in the literary context of the *Letters* the frequent appearance of words belonging to a technical lexicon is sufficient to simulate a technical register.<sup>34</sup> Seneca’s use of agricultural language has a specific purpose which we will discuss below, but I will first demonstrate that sections 86.17–21 do in fact engage seriously with agricultural language by cataloguing the distinctive technical terms that Seneca employs (s.vv., in order of first occurrence): *pono/depono* = “plant” (86.17, 19 *bis*, 20),<sup>35</sup> *circumcido* = “prune around,” “trim” (86.17),<sup>36</sup> *transferro* = “transplant” (86.17, 20), *rapum* = “rootball” (86.17, 18),<sup>37</sup> *amputo* = “prune (around)” (86.17), *fimum* = “manure” (86.17),<sup>38</sup> *scrobis* = “planting hole” (86.17),<sup>39</sup> *demitto* = “plant” (86.17),<sup>40</sup> *aggero* = “earth up” (86.17),<sup>41</sup> *calco* = “pack down” (86.17),<sup>42</sup> *pisatio* = “packing” (86.18),<sup>43</sup> *surgo* = “grow (upward)” (86.19),<sup>44</sup> *arbustum* = “vine-supporting tree” (86.20),<sup>45</sup> *capillamenta* = “root threads” (86.20),<sup>46</sup> *radicesco* = “put out roots” (86.20), *grandiscapius* = “large-trunked” (86.21),<sup>47</sup> *adiuvo* = “aid” a plant’s growth (sc. by the application of water, manure, etc.) (86.21).<sup>48</sup>

33. André 1986, 9. *Contra* André’s position, see esp. Langslow 2005, with bibliography on 292; also Callebat 1990. Adams (1995, 646) looks on André’s claim more favorably, at least in the sphere of medical and veterinary Latin.

34. Cf. the impression of Minarini 1997, 271–72: “Si tratta di una descrizione minuziosa, ricca di particolari tecnici, che appare un po’ fuori luogo e rischia forse di tediare l’interlocutore.”

35. For *pono*, see TLL 10/1.2636.35–63 (Reineke-Hillen); *OLD*, s.v. *pono* 4; Svennung 1935, 597; Coleman 2014, 8. For *depono*, see TLL 5/1.576.74–577.1 (Jachmann); *OLD*, s.v. 5a. Rimell (2015, 195 n. 83) suspects wordplay with *pono*, which can also refer to expression in speech and writing.

36. *Circumcido* is used in a variety of technical senses by the agronomists: for the present meaning, see TLL 3/1122.57–66 (Hoppe); *OLD*, s.v. 2c; White 1970, 263. For the collocation *circumcidere ramos*, cf. *Dig.* 43.27.1.8: *rami arboris circumcidantur*; Pallad. 3.13.2: *circumcisis capreolis et ramulis* (“shearing the tendrils and little branches”).

37. *Rapum* usually means “turnip,” and in the sense of “rootball” or “underground stock of a tree” (thus *OLD*, s.v. 2) is found only in Sen. *Ep.* 86. Seneca offers no apologies or explanatory periphrasis for the word, which may suggest that he has borrowed a colloquial usage (as though going *Anglice* from turnip as “root vegetable” to “roots” generally) rather than expanded the word’s significance himself.

38. On *fimum*, see Adams 1982, 234–37. For the collocation *fimo tingere*, cf. Pallad. 11.11.1 (on the endive): *cum ponemus . . . fimo tingimus* (“when planting . . . we dip it first in manure”).

39. See *OLD*, s.v.; White 1970, 236–37.

40. See TLL 5/1.490.38–53 (Kieckers), “in agricultura, i.q. serere, plantare;” Bruno 1969, 26.

41. *Aggero* (*ad* + *gero*) by contamination for *aggero* (*agger* + *o*): see *OLD*, s.v. *aggero*<sup>1</sup> 3a. For the latter, see Columella *Rust.* 11.2.46; *Arb.* 28.3; Pallad. 12.9.1; White 1970, 263. In this sense, *aggero* is synonymous in an agricultural setting with *adobruere* (TLL 1/792.73 [Vollmer]; Westerath 1938, 37) and *adcumulo* (cf. Plin. *HN* 17.139, 18.230).

42. *Calco* is, perhaps, not truly technical, since it can be analyzed under the ordinary meaning of “trample” or “ram down earth” (*OLD*, s.v. 1; TLL 3/134.11–31 [Hey]), but the word is frequently used by the agronomists in application to plants, as here.

43. A *hapax*, but the nominalization is very regular (Leumann 1977, 365–67; see also Setaioli 2000, 13 n. 21) and would be characteristic of the noun-based (“nominal”) style that has been described as appropriate to technical language: on that subject, see Langslow 2000, 377–430.

44. Cf. Scrib. Larg. 227: *multorum ramorum in rectum surgentium* (“many branches growing straight up”); Plin. *HN* 17.184 (of the vine): *initio adminiculum desiderabit, dum stare condiscet et recta surgere* (“at first it requires a prop, until it has learned how to stand up and grow straight”).

45. In a technical sense the word usually refers to a plantation of trees for the purpose of supporting vines (*vitis arbustiva*): see TLL 2/430.34–63 (Bannier); *OLD*, s.v. 2; Bruno 1969, 62; White 1970, 236. Here it refers to a single tree with the same function. Earlier at *Ep.* 86.14, however, the word just = *arbor*, which is an unusual substitution but seems to be a Senecan idiosyncrasy (TLL 2/430.16–21 [Bannier]).

46. See *OLD*, s.v. *capillamentum* 2a; TLL 3/312.52–60 (Meister); Bruno 1969, 80.

47. Another *hapax*, for which Seneca feels that he must apologize (*ut ita dicam*): *scapus* (“trunk,” see *OLD*, s.v. 1a; Bruno 1969, 78) + *grandis* (for the word in an agricultural context, see Maltby 1999, 247).

48. Cf. Columella *Rust.* 3.11.9: *stercore adiuves*; 4.10.2: [sc. *semina*] *pampinationibus adiuvanda*; 5.9.16: [sc. *arbor*] *ablaqueatione adiuvanda*. For other verbs in similar constructions, cf. Columella *Rust.* 3.1.8, *ra-*

Why does Seneca adopt and sustain the language of agriculture here? The appropriation of technical terminology from other disciplines is, it is true, characteristic of Seneca's style in the *Letters*;<sup>49</sup> yet this practice stands in contrast here and elsewhere to his general avoidance of a technical *philosophical* register, which he eschews in favor of a more conversational idiom.<sup>50</sup> Were Seneca to be as scrupulous in avoiding unusual agricultural terminology as philosophical, we might expect this passage to have a different cast; as it is, however, he introduces two vivid *hapax legomena* in a brief space, *pisatio* and *grandiscapius*, and deploys other words (e.g., *rapum*) in technical senses not found elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> The density and apparent difficulty of the technical terminology in *Ep.* 86 is striking, and prompts us to reflect on the nature of technical language both in this letter and in others. As I will suggest, Seneca's linguistic practice in the digression can in fact be explained on the basis of philosophical themes that we have already discussed.

In section 2, we considered the educational consequences of Seneca's emphasis in the *Letters* on the superiority of actions (*res, opera*) to words (*verba*). This same commitment ramifies in many ways through the *Letters*, but another important subject that it influences is language. For our purposes, Seneca's opinions on the language appropriate to philosophical communication can be summed up by way of two programmatic statements: *quae veritati operam dat oratio incomposita esse debet et simplex* ("speech which serves truth should be simple and plain," *Ep.* 40.4); [*sc. eloquentia*] *sit talis ut res potius quam se ostendat* ("let our eloquence be of such a sort as to put on display the matter at hand, rather than itself," 75.5).<sup>52</sup> These positive statements regarding the best kind of philosophical discourse may be supplemented by the negative characterizations found in Seneca's frequent criticisms of the language of the dialecticians, philosophers, and poets: he repeatedly attacks on the one hand excessive subtlety or care for ornate composition,<sup>53</sup> and on the other archaic, newfangled, or otherwise perverse or unusual language.<sup>54</sup> The improper use of or attention to language can impair philosophical instruction, whose end is in action; philosophical language should be not for itself, but for the benefits that it brings to the *proficiens* (cf. *Ep.* 75.5: *non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint*). Seneca's claims that language ought to be clear, unpretentious, even unartful,<sup>55</sup> and provide direct access to *res*, are entirely in keeping with his position that actions, not words, are the aim of

*dicibus umorem sumministret*, with Garg. Mart. 3.1.5 (in Zainaldin forthcoming) = Condorelli 1978, 31, *umoris alimenta subministrentur*. The word belongs to a class of medical terms transferred to agricultural operations.

49. See Migliorini 1997, 21–94 (medical language); Setaioli 2000, 12–13; von Albrecht 2014, 706.

50. See esp. Inwood 2005, 18–20; further, Currie 1966; Setaioli 2000, 9–95 (colloquial elements); Hine 2005 (on avoidance of poetic words, with appreciative commentary at von Albrecht 2014, 702–6); von Albrecht 2014, 711; Williams 2015, 135–36. Coleman 1974, although outdated in some claims, emphasizes the richness of Seneca's language.

51. The point stands even if the especially odd agricultural terms are not so odd as we think (they might, e.g., belong to a submerged strain of technical language).

52. See also Williams 2015, 140–41, with further bibliography at 141 n. 30.

53. To the references in n. 10, add (on ornamentation) *Ep.* 59.5, 100; (on subtlety) 82.8–9, 100.5.

54. Cf. *Ep.* 108.35 and esp. 114 (with Graver 1998; Laudizi 2004).

55. One of the literal meanings of *incompositus* (*Ep.* 40.4, quoted above); see *OLD*, s.v. 1a; *TLL* 7/1.994.14–37 (Rehm).

philosophy. Language is not itself the end, but rather a beginning of change and progress in the auditor.

When interpreted in light of Seneca's statements on language, the agricultural passage of *Ep.* 86.17–21 becomes an indirect paradigm for the language of philosophy. I do not mean to claim that the density of its technical terminology reflects Seneca's practice with philosophical words in the *Letters*, for this is not strictly true, as we have already noted.<sup>56</sup> I suggest, rather, that when Seneca employs the technical language of agriculture to relay Aegialus' transplanting instructions, this language serves as an exemplary case of speech that shows the "thing" (*res ostendere*), not itself (*se*). What is characteristic of technical language in general is that it eschews stylistic ornamentation—for example, *variatio*, *abundantia*, and ornate periphrasis—in favor of syntactic and semantic compression.<sup>57</sup> In principle, the clear, unaffected, and workmanlike nature of such language is in agreement with Seneca's opinions on philosophical discourse—and it may be in part for this reason that Seneca so often borrows technical language from other disciplines.<sup>58</sup> If technical philosophical language in particular is "bad" according to Seneca, it is not bad *qua* technical, then, but only insofar as it distracts the *proficiens* from what is really important, progress *in rebus*.

Agricultural language offers an alternative kind of technical communication that avoids this pitfall. It does not draw the auditor's attention away from things (*res*) and toward abstract conceptual knowledge; on the contrary, it necessarily describes concrete objects and actions, involving the reader in the very muck and manure of farming.<sup>59</sup> The kind of philosophical language that Seneca criticizes fails because it directs our attention toward distinctions and concepts in words that, however fine and subtle in their own right, do not bear fruit in action. Agricultural language provides an "earthy" counterpart; while it is conceivable that it too might develop into a form that is worthless to the pupil of agronomy, in practice such an outcome is checked by the materiality of its subject: the right instructions, expressed in the right language, will, quite literally, bear fruit. Philosophical language must do the same in the fertile ground of our souls.

#### 4. THE STOIC *SCALA NATURAE* AND PLANT AND HUMAN LIFE IN THE *LETTERS*

Now I would like to address a set of more general questions: How is it that we can compare agriculture and philosophy in a nonarbitrary way? That is, what is the ground for such a comparison? Supposing there *is* a ground, what value does the analogy between agriculture and philosophy have both in *Ep.* 86 and in Seneca's *Letters* more widely? It will be my aim in this section to sketch an answer to these questions and, in so doing, to provide an architectonic justification for the investigations of sections 2–3 and beyond. Thus we will be

56. See n. 50 above, and esp. Inwood 2005, 19–20.

57. In the context of Latin prose, see chiefly Langslow 2000, 377–83, 408–18. This is not to say, however, that technical writing cannot also have literary and rhetorical ambitions apart from its goals of directing "extratextual" activity (Formisano 2006, 133): see Formisano's brief remarks *ibid.*, and for a literary approach to ancient technical writing, Formisano 2001.

58. See n. 49 above.

59. See nn. 35–48 above.

thinking “outward” from *Ep.* 86 toward the relationship of agriculture and philosophy more broadly. I will argue that the physical structure of the universe according to Stoic philosophy, in particular the *scala naturae*, underwrites comparisons between human and plant growth and their flourishing. The natural relationship between humans and plants in turn allows us to conceive of both plants/humans and agriculture/philosophy analogically. Building on recent work in Seneca’s *philosophica*, I argue that the analogy between agriculture and philosophy has a broader didactic and philosophical function in the *Letters*.

As is well known, the Stoics maintained that a substance known as πνεῦμα (“breath”) permeates all things in nature as an organizing and, in the case of higher beings, animating principle.<sup>60</sup> The doctrine of πνεῦμα is notoriously obscure, but it is not necessary for our purposes to work out all of its difficulties. What is more important for us is the fact that the Stoics thought that it was the presence of πνεῦμα in all things that ensured the “continuity and unity of nature through all [its] levels.”<sup>61</sup> From the bottom up, the first four levels of the *scala naturae* included inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans. The addition of a certain modification of πνεῦμα characterizes each higher level of the *scala*, and beings at the next rung up retain all of the modifications of πνεῦμα of the lower levels while incorporating a new one. Beings of the lowest level, inanimate objects such as sticks and stones, possess πνεῦμα only in the form of ἔξις, which is something like “power of coherence”; plants have πνεῦμα as φύσις in addition to ἔξις; animals have ἔξις, φύσις, and ψυχή; and humans have all of these plus λόγος.<sup>62</sup> Πνεῦμα structures the hierarchy of beings from top to bottom, and moving from one rung of the ladder to another does not entail addition of a new psychic or corporeal substance per se, only the elaboration or modification of a common principle of existence. The continuity offered by πνεῦμα in the *scala* allowed the Stoics to appeal to a common mechanism in explaining the constitutions of different living beings.

This mechanism was the ἡγεμονικόν (L. *principatus, principale*, etc.), or “ruling faculty,” which was thought to be responsible, in ensouled creatures, not only for life, but also for perception and impulse;<sup>63</sup> in the mature human, this “leading part” of the soul was reason (λόγος/*ratio*). Although the ἡγεμονικόν was discussed most frequently *qua* controlling element of the human soul, it is important for our purposes to observe that it was found not only in human beings, but also in different forms in animals and plants. This fact is well illustrated by Cicero’s remarks in *De natura deorum* on the *scala naturae* (2.29).<sup>64</sup>

omnem enim naturam necesse est, quae non solitaria sit neque simplex sed cum alio iuncta atque conexas, habere aliquem in se principatum, ut in homine mentem, in belua quiddam

60. On the important doctrine of πνεῦμα, which took much of its impetus from ancient medical theory, and some of the problems connected with it, see, e.g., Inwood 1985, 20–21; Long and Sedley 1987, 287–89; Sedley 1999, 388–90, 402–3; Long 1999, 560–72; White 2003, 134–36; Hankinson 2003, 298–301.

61. Inwood 1985, 20.

62. Along with the references in n. 60, see [Gal.] *Intr.* 14.726.7–11 (Kühn) = *SVF* 2.716; Origen *Princ.* 3.1.2–3 = *SVF* 2.988; Philo *Leg. alleg.* 2.22–23 = *SVF* 2.458.

63. See Ar. *Did.* 39.21–25, with Powers 2012, 256–57; cf. Long 1999, 563–64. On the translation “ruling faculty,” which follows Powers 2012, see his remarks at p. 256 n. 24.

64. Text is from Ax 1933.

simile mentis, unde oriantur rerum adpetitus; in arborum autem et earum rerum quae gignuntur e terra radicibus inesse principatus putatur. principatum autem id dico quod Graeci ἡγεμονικόν vocant, quo nihil in quoque genere nec potest nec debet esse praestantius.

For every being which is not alone or simple, but joined and connected with something else, must possess some ruling faculty within itself: in humans it is mind, in animals something that is like mind, from which desire for things arises; and in the case of trees and all things which grow from the earth, the ruling faculty is thought to reside in the roots. By “ruling faculty” I mean that thing which the Greeks call the ἡγεμονικόν, which nothing in any sort of creature can or ought to surpass.

Cicero is not alone in reporting that plants possess a ἡγεμονικόν,<sup>65</sup> and, if we take this passage and the other evidence seriously, then we must adopt a more inclusive understanding of the term. Thus while ἡγεμονικόν may most often denote the “ruling faculty” or “leading part” of the human being, “the term can also be used more broadly to denote the very same part of the soul in so far as it explains (as it also does) facts about the animal’s constitution in general (*or to denote the analogous part of a plant’s nature that will explain facts about its constitution*).”<sup>66</sup> It is, of course, just because the ἡγεμονικόν is a modification of the πνεῦμα that it is present in all complex creatures and plays a similar function at different levels of the *scala*.

It may be objected that Seneca nowhere explicitly attributes a ἡγεμονικόν to plants (although he does so for animals: cf. *Dial.* 3.3.7, where ἡγεμονικόν is alternately translated by *regius*, *OLD*, s.v. 4d, and *principale*, *TLL* 10/2.1292.49–74 [Spath]). This is to overlook the crucial evidence of *Ep.* 121,<sup>67</sup> where Seneca implies that plants have ἡγεμονικόν no less than humans. Consider first *Ep.* 121.10: *constitutio . . . est . . . principale animi quodam modo se habens erga corpus* (“the constitution is the ruling faculty [i.e., ἡγεμονικόν] of the soul in a certain relationship to the body”). Now add *Ep.* 121.15, where Seneca repeatedly states that plants have varying *constitutiones* governing different stages of their growth: [sc. *herba*] *in quamcumque constitutionem venit, eam tuetur, in eam componitur* (“whatever constitution the plant has entered into, it preserves it and is composed according to it”). These passages support the following argument: plants have a *constitutio*; but a *constitutio* is nothing more than a kind of *principale* (ἡγεμονικόν); ergo plants have a *principale*.

But in what sense are the ἡγεμονικά of humans and plants comparable? There is an immediate physiological analogy between the ἡγεμονικόν of humans and that of plants because in each case it is the ἡγεμονικόν in some disposition to the body that determines what the thing is like. Plants develop their capacities according to φύσις, and nothing else; humans, not only φύσις, but also ψυχή and most properly λόγος. There is also a teleological analogy. Now, the highest form of πνεῦμα in a being properly defines it (cf. *Ep.* 76.8–11), and it is this form of πνεῦμα with which the ἡγεμονικόν may be identified at each rung of the *scala*. We may say that a being most flourishes, namely, is best at being what it is, when it

65. See also Sext. *Emp. Math.* 9.119–20, with Powers 2012, 261–62; add possibly Ps.-Phil. *Ant.* 37.2.

66. Powers 2012, 262, emphasis my own.

67. Cf. Powers 2012, 257.

most flourishes in respect of whatever it is that distinguishes it from what it is better than, namely, what is lower than it on the *scala*. In the case of human beings, the perfected ἡγεμονικόν itself is what is best, namely, λόγος (cf. *Ep.* 41.8, 124): when a human obtains it, he or she is also best in the sense that he or she is best in relation to what makes him or her distinctly human.

This teleological picture holds in the case of plants, too, despite some initial complications. There are two concerns: (1) We do not know with certainty where Seneca would have located the ἡγεμονικόν of the plants, even if it seems that he may have thought of it as belonging in the roots;<sup>68</sup> (2) Seneca claims explicitly that what is best about plants is their *fruit* (*Ep.* 41.7, 76.8; cf. 34.1, 124.11)—no mention of the roots, trunk, foliage, or any other part which was conventionally mooted by the Stoics as the home of the ἡγεμονικόν.<sup>69</sup> But if a plant is best in view of its fruit, what is the teleological function of the ἡγεμονικόν? The first (1) of the above concerns is an empirical matter, and not altogether important for the analogy. The second (2) seems more problematic but can be cleared up by attending to the different ways in which we might call a plant “best.” Suppose that a plant comes to be best. This is in one sense just to say that it is best in that it has the best or perhaps most fruit. We might call this a “descriptive” claim. But in another sense it is to refer to the conditions that explain *how* it has the best fruit—and here we will be making reference to the perfected ἡγεμονικόν of the plant. That is, when we say that a plant is “best,” we may understand this to mean that it is best in respect of its ἡγεμονικόν (be it in the roots, foliage, or trunk), for it is in virtue of this that it has the best fruit. This could be called an “explanatory” claim and is arguably the more philosophically satisfactory answer to the question of the plant’s being best in that it also gives the reason (λόγος) for the fact. The upshot of distinguishing between descriptive and explanatory claims is that the plant ἡγεμονικόν does not itself have to be what is best in the very same sense that the fruit is best, provided that it explains how the plant comes to possess such fruit.

We turn now to the value and relevance of establishing an analogy between plants and humans through the ἡγεμονικόν. While we cannot explore the full consequences of the analogy here (I hope to do so at greater length elsewhere), I will suggest their importance by showing how the analogy can bolster and connect other scholarly approaches to Seneca. Recent scholarship has continued to assess the function of metaphor in Seneca’s *Letters*.<sup>70</sup> Shadi Bartsch, for example, has argued that metaphor plays a central role in Seneca’s philosophical thought by “refiguring” our “self-understanding” in terms of a variety of metaphorical roles.<sup>71</sup> These metaphors help us to come to grips with what the

68. This location can be tentatively deduced from the great importance that Seneca attaches to the roots for the nutrition and growth of plants: the root pruning of *Ep.* 86.17 is suggestive, and cf. *Ben.* 3.29.5; *QNat.* 3.27.5; *Ep.* 58.14, 95.64.

69. Cicero placed the ἡγεμονικόν in the roots (*Nat. D.* 2.29, quoted above). Sextus Empiricus (*Math.* 9.119–20) says that the Stoics variously located it in the roots (κατὰ τὰς ρίζας), foliage (κατὰ τὴν κόμην), or trunk (κατὰ τὸ ἐγκάρδιον).

70. See esp. Bartsch 2009. Some other approaches (Armisen-Marchetti 1989, 23–26; Inwood 2005, 31–32) are considered at Bartsch 2009, 188–91.

71. Bartsch 2009, 195.



“self” may be and what “operations” the self “ought to impose upon itself.”<sup>72</sup> Bartsch examines how Seneca exploits, among other figures, the idea of the self as an “inner space,” a “work of art,” and so on. We might of course add to these the self as “plant” or self as “vine,” images which Seneca undoubtedly exploits to great effect both in *Ep.* 86 and elsewhere. Now consider another approach to Seneca that puts the emphasis on a different aspect of his philosophical activity. Gareth Williams in his study of the *Natural Questions* undertakes a far-reaching examination of Seneca’s worldview.<sup>73</sup> As Williams demonstrates in his “integrating” readings,<sup>74</sup> Seneca’s technical and scientific investigations in the *Natural Questions* draw on a unified picture of nature in order to offer morally salient lessons. Although Williams’ strategy for theoretically grounding this approach is somewhat different from our own,<sup>75</sup> he has shown beyond any doubt that Seneca’s “wholeness of viewpoint” imbues his scientific investigations with ethical significance, and vice versa.<sup>76</sup>

Taking the approaches of Bartsch and Williams as reference points, I argue that the examination of the Stoic *scala* offered here (section 4) suggests a way of fusing their insights, specifically by allowing the agricultural (and other natural) imagery in the *Letters* to have it both ways: such imagery is not only “metaphorical,” didactically refiguring and aiding the pupil’s philosophical growth, but also “scientific,” inviting the pupil to reflect on the unified structure of nature and the ethical significance of that fact. That is to say, the well-established literary and didactic function of metaphor in the *Letters* must also be read against the background of Stoic physical theory, which in turn points toward a unified view of nature that, at the same time as it underpins scientific and technical investigations, also lends them a real ethical import. Consequently, when Seneca deliberately uses an agricultural metaphor,<sup>77</sup> we should suspect that something important is going on: not only a nudge toward introspection and refiguration, but also an implication that the soul has to be rethought specifically along the lines of a natural affinity or analogy. Recall, for example, the recurring imagery of aging or degraded plants in the *Letters* (e.g., *Ep.* 12.2 and 112.1–2, besides 86), imagery that is at different times more or less explicitly connected with the problem of the soul that has grown stagnant or else become inured to vice.<sup>78</sup> The possibility of philosophical therapy for such a soul is in doubt when a person cannot be made to see the error of their ways, or has become positively attached to false and damaging beliefs. Seneca exploits the visibility of the condition of the plant ἡγεμονικόν and the processes of grafting and transplanting in order to present to the eye an image of the analogous effects of philosophy on the soul. He also

72. Bartsch 2009, 195, 200.

73. Williams 2012. For precedents to this approach, see the bibliography at Williams 2012, 11 n. 27.

74. Cf. Williams 2012, 11, 54, and passim.

75. Though not in any way contradictory; see Williams 2012, chap. 1 and passim.

76. Williams 2012, 41.

77. Cf. the typology of metaphors at Inwood 2005, 31 n. 15.

78. The imagery of, e.g., *Ep.* 112 is explicitly allegorical, and that of *Ep.* 86 is rendered so by the final remarks: *plura te docere non cogito, ne quemadmodum Aegialus me sibi adversarium paravit, sic ego parem te mihi* (“I don’t have a mind to tell you anymore; otherwise, just as Aegialus trained me up as his opponent, I’ll be training you up as mine,” 86.21). On the theme of the soul afflicted by vice, cf. *Ep.* 25.1–3, 94.24, 97.10, 104.18, 112.1–2.

draws on concrete agricultural experience and facts in order to explain why and how philosophy may be effective in some cases (*Ep.* 86.20) and in others fail to take hold (*Ep.* 112).<sup>79</sup>

Consider another important consequence of the human-plant analogy, namely, the philosophy-agriculture analogy examined in some of its particulars above (sections 2–3). “Philosophy is an art” (*sapientia ars est*, *Ep.* 29.3), Seneca says, and, indeed, throughout the *Letters* it is often cast as a sort of τέχνη (*ars*) of practical decision-making by which one may improve one’s life.<sup>80</sup> Philosophy cultivates above all reason (λόγος)—the human ἡγεμονικόν—from which, when it is perfected, flows the virtue and happiness that we seek. We need not search long to find a similar τέχνη that would concern itself with the plant ἡγεμονικόν (wherever it may be located), which governs nutrition, growth, and the production of fruit and flower: the discipline of *agri cultura*. It is not only the analogy between human and plant “self,” then, that is grounded through the ἡγεμονικόν, but also the analogy of philosophy and agriculture, since each of these *artes* may be characterized as a technique of caring for the ἡγεμονικόν. Further implications and physical analogies wait to be worked out; the foregoing will, I hope, suggest a path for such research.

##### 5. CONCLUSION: PUTTING THE READINGS IN CONTEXT

While the readings above are, by design, not separate from one another, it may be of value in conclusion to situate them within the context of recent work on Seneca. *Ep.* 86 is especially rich in intertextual allusions, reflections on Roman history, and varied and surprising metaphors. It is, then, no wonder that the letter has been the focus of renewed attention in the last decade by scholars concerned above all with it as a product of a specific literary culture;<sup>81</sup> but for all the attention that Latinists have lavished upon *Ep.* 86, it has garnered less interest from the philosophical community.<sup>82</sup> Admittedly there are other *Letters* more overtly “philosophical” than 86, and, from a pragmatic standpoint, one might not use this epistle to introduce Seneca in his most traditionally philosophical mode. But an important turn in Senecan scholarship has shown that literature and philosophy interpenetrate one another to a surprising degree in Seneca’s writings. These studies have set Senecan studies on a new footing by demonstrating the need to read each part of his corpus in light of the “whole” of his ambitions.<sup>83</sup>

Following this scholarly turn, the readings that I have offered in this article are an attempt to explore philosophical themes in the literary grounds of *Ep.* 86.

79. *Ep.* 86.20, for example, takes an optimistic approach, suggesting that even late transplanting of the vine (*non tantum mense Februario positas sed etiam Martio exacto*) may be effective; 112.2 is less hopeful, with Seneca emphasizing that the plant’s capacity to nourish a scion or change its own nature is hindered by age (*aut non recipiet surculum aut non alet nec adplicabit sibi nec in qualitem eius naturamque transibit*).

80. For philosophy, implicitly or explicitly, as an *ars*, see *Ep.* 64.7–8, 84.10–11, 85.32–37, 87.16–17, 88 (esp. 28), 89.5–6, 94.1–4, 95.8, 104.19; and that the goal of such a science is to achieve consistency in right decisions (i.e., perfected power of judgment), see *Ep.* 20.5, 23.7–8, 35.4, 66.13, 71.1–2, 71.32, 76.18, 92.3, 109.16, 120.19–22.

81. See nn. 1 and 6 above; but for philosophical observations, too, cf. Rimell 2015, 191, esp. n. 74.

82. It is absent from Inwood 2007b, and note the paltry few references in the *index locorum* of Wildberger and Colish 2014.

83. To borrow from the title of the 2006 volume with the same emphasis edited by Volk and Williams.

The technical language and subject matter of the agricultural digression in this letter offer the reader a number of opportunities to reflect on the proper character and language of philosophical activity. We began (section 2) by considering how the outer frame's comparison between Virgil and Aegialus as agricultural authorities dramatizes and reinforces the value of "autopsy" in education. Actions, not words, are the goal of philosophical activity, just as they are of agriculture, and philosophical instruction must reflect this fact. Next, we looked at the marked agricultural language in the digression (section 3) and argued that it goes some way toward modeling a salutary technical register, which eschews a showy style in favor of the kinds of language suited to conveying the matter (*res*) at hand. Here again, the priority of actions to words that Seneca touts elsewhere in the *Letters* shapes his approach to the subject. Finally, we turned outward (section 4) and explored how the Stoic *scala naturae* offers a philosophically robust way of connecting the growth and care of plants to the growth and care of the human rational faculty. This connection is realized through the unity of nature provided by the Stoic doctrine of *πνεῦμα*, which, in complex beings, takes the form of a "ruling faculty" (ἡγεμονικόν). Stoic physics thus grounds allegorical readings of plant life in *Ep.* 86 and Seneca's *philosophica* more widely.<sup>84</sup>

*Harvard University*

84. I thank especially Kathleen Coleman, whose advice and commentary on numerous drafts of this article greatly improved it, and the two anonymous referees, for their helpful criticism. I am also grateful to George Conklin, Jonathan Master, Katherine D. van Schaik, and Garth Tissol for reading this article and for offering suggestions on it. This article is for TZ, who taught me to love nature and to look for philosophy everywhere in it.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Adams, J. N. 1982. *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*. London.
- . 1995. *Pelagonius and Latin Veterinary Terminology in the Roman Empire*. *Studies in Ancient Medicine* 11. Leiden.
- Albrecht, Michael von. 2014. Seneca's Language and Style. In *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, ed. Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil, 699–744. Leiden.
- André, Jacques, ed. 1964. *Pline l'Ancien: Histoire naturelle; Livre XVII*. Paris.
- . 1986. Sur la constitution des langues techniques en latin. *EL* 3–18.
- Armisen-Marchetti, Mireille. 1989. *Sapientiae facies: Étude sur les images de Sénèque*. *Collection d'études anciennes* 58. Paris.
- . 2015. Seneca's Images and Metaphors. In *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro, 150–60. Cambridge.
- Ax, W., ed. 1933. *M. Tulli Ciceronis scripta quae manserunt omnia, fasc. 45: De Natura Deorum*. Leipzig.
- Bartsch, Shadi. 2009. Senecan Metaphor and Stoic Self-Instruction. In *Seneca and the Self*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and David Wray, 188–217. Cambridge.
- Boldrer, Francesca, ed. 1996. *L. Iuni Moderati Columellae Rei Rusticae liber decimus (carmen de cultu hortorum)*. *Testi e studi di cultura classica* 17. Pisa.
- Bruno, Maria Grazia. 1969. *Il lessico agricolo latino*<sup>2</sup>. Amsterdam.

- Callebat, Louis. 1990. Langages techniques et langue commune. In *Latin vulgaire—latin tardif II: Actes du II<sup>ème</sup> Colloque international sur le latin vulgaire et tardif (Boulogne, 29 Août–2 Septembre 1988)*, ed. Gualtiero Calboli, 45–56. Tübingen.
- Christmann, Eckhard. 1982. Zur antiken Georgica-Rezeption. *WürrJbb* 8: 57–67.
- Coleman, Kathleen. 2014. Melior's Plane Tree: An Introduction to the Ancient Garden. In *Le jardin dans l'Antiquité*, ed. Kathleen Coleman, 1–26, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique 60. Vandoeuvres.
- Coleman, Robert. 1974. The Artful Moralist: A Study of Seneca's Epistolary Style. *CQ* 24: 276–89.
- Condorelli, Sebastiano, ed. 1978. *Gargilii Martialis quae exstant*. Rome.
- Cooper, John M. 2004. *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ.
- Currie, H. MacL. 1966. The Younger Seneca's Style: Some Observations. *BICS* 13: 76–87.
- Del Giovane, Barbara. 2012. Seneca, Scipione, e l'ombra di Cicerone: A proposito dell'*Epistola* 86. *Prometheus* 38: 155–74.
- Doody, Aude. 2007. Critiques of the *Georgics* in Columella and Pliny. *CP* 102: 180–97.
- Edwards, Catharine. 2015. Absent Presence in Seneca's *Epistles*: Philosophy and Friendship. In *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro, 41–53. Cambridge.
- Fantham, Elaine, trans. 2010. *Seneca: Selected Letters*. Oxford.
- Formisano, Marco. 2001. *Tecnica e scrittura: Le letterature tecnico-scientifiche nello spazio letterario tardolatino*. Ricerche 95. Rome.
- . 2006. Frontinus on Water Supply. Review of *Frontinus: "De Aquaeductu Urbis Romae," Edited with Introduction and Commentary*, by R. H. Rodgers. *CR* 56: 132–35.
- Gowers, Emily. 2000. Vegetable Love: Virgil, Columella, and Garden Poetry. *Ramus* 29: 127–48.
- Gowing, Alain M. 2005. *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture*. Cambridge.
- Graver, Margaret. 1998. The Manhandling of Maecenas: Senecan Abstractions of Masculinity. *AJP* 119: 608–32.
- Griffin, Miriam T. 1976. *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*. Oxford.
- Gummere, Richard M., trans. 1920. *Seneca: "Epistles" 66–92*. Loeb Classical Library. London.
- Hadot, Ilsetraut. 1969. *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung*. Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie 13. Berlin.
- Hankinson, R. J. 2003. Stoicism and Medicine. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood, 295–309. Cambridge.
- Henderson, John. 2002. Columella's Living Hedge: The Roman Gardening Book. *JRS* 92: 110–33.
- . 2004. *Morals and Villas in Seneca's "Letters": Places to Dwell*. Cambridge.
- Hine, Harry M. 2005. Poetic Influence on Prose: The Case of Seneca the Younger. In *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, ed. Tobias Reinhardt, Michael Lapidge, and J. N. Adams, 211–37, Proceedings of the British Academy 129. Oxford.
- Inwood, Brad. 1985. *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*. Oxford.
- . 2005. *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford.
- . 2007a. The Importance of Form in Seneca's Philosophical Letters. In *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, ed. Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison, 133–48. Oxford.
- , trans. 2007b. *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*. Oxford.
- Ker, James. 2006. Seneca, Man of Many Genres. In *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics*, ed. Katharina Volk and Gareth D. Williams, 19–41, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 28. Leiden.
- . 2009. *The Deaths of Seneca*. Oxford.
- . 2015. Seneca and Augustan Culture. In *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro, 109–21. Cambridge.

- Kolendo, Jerzy. 1980. *L'agricoltura nell'Italia romana: Tecniche agrarie e progresso economico dalla tarda repubblica al principato*. Trans. Celeste Zawadzka. Biblioteca di storia antica 10. Rome.
- Langslow, D. R. 2000. *Medical Latin in the Roman Empire*. Oxford.
- . 2005. "Langues réduites au lexique"? The Languages of Latin Technical Prose. In *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, ed. Tobias Reinhardt, Michael Lapidge, and J. N. Adams, 287–302. Proceedings of the British Academy 129. Oxford.
- Laudizi, Giovanni. 2004. Seneca (ep. 114) e la corruzione dello stile. *BStudLat* 34.1: 39–56.
- Leumann, Manu. 1977. *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*. Munich.
- Long, A. A. 1999. Stoic Psychology. In *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield, 560–84. Cambridge.
- Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley, eds. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1, *Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*. Cambridge.
- Maltby, Robert. 1999. Technical Language in Tibullus. *Emerita* 47.2: 231–49.
- Mazzoli, Giancarlo. 1970. *Seneca e la poesia*. Milan.
- . 1989. Le *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* di Seneca: Valore letterario e filosofico. *ANRW* 2.36.3: 1823–77.
- Migliorini, P. 1997. *Scienza e terminologia medica nella letteratura latina di età neroniana: Seneca, Lucano, Persio, Petronio*. Studien zur klassischen Philologie 104. Frankfurt.
- Minarini, Alessandra. 1997. Una epistola perduta di Seneca e una reminiscenza oraziana. *Paideia* 52: 263–74.
- Motto, Anna Lydia, and John R. Clark. 1993. *Essays on Seneca*. Frankfurt.
- Powell, J. G. F., ed. 1988. *Cicero: Cato Maior de Senectute*. Cambridge.
- Powers, Nathan. 2012. The Stoic Argument for the Rationality of the Cosmos. *OSAPh* 43: 245–69.
- Putnam, M. C. J. 1979. *Virgil's Poem of the Earth: Studies in the "Georgics"*. Princeton, NJ.
- Reynolds, L. D., ed. 1965. *L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*. 2 vols. Oxford.
- Rimell, Victoria. 2013. The Best a Man Can Get: Grooming Scipio in Seneca *Epistle* 86. *CP* 108: 1–20.
- . 2015. *The Closure of Space in Roman Poetics: Empire's Inward Turn*. Cambridge.
- Rodgers, R. H., ed. 2010. *L. Iuni Moderati Columella Res Rustica: Incerti auctoris liber De Arboribus*. Oxford.
- Sedley, David. 1999. Hellenistic Physics and Metaphysics. In *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield, 355–411. Cambridge.
- Setaioli, Aldo. 2000. *Facundus Seneca: Aspetti della lingua e dell'ideologia senecana*. Testi e manuali per l'insegnamento universitario del latino 68. Bologna.
- . 2014. *Epistulae Morales*. In *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, ed. Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil, 191–200. Leiden.
- Smith, Charles Sidney. 1910. *Metaphor and Comparison in the "Epistulae ad Lucilium" of L. Annaeus Seneca*. Baltimore.
- Spurr, M. S. 1986. Agriculture and the *Georgics*. *GaR* 33: 164–87.
- Steyns, D. 1907. *Étude sur les métaphores et les comparaisons dans les œuvres en prose de Sénèque le philosophe*. Ghent.
- Summers, Walters C., ed. 1910. *Select Letters of Seneca, Edited with Introductions and Explanatory Notes*. London.
- Svennung, J. 1935. *Untersuchungen zu Palladius und zur lateinischen Fach- und Volkssprache*. Lund.
- Thomas, Richard F. 1987. Prose into Poetry: Tradition and Meaning in Virgil's *Georgics*. *HSCP* 91: 229–60.
- Tosi, Giovanna. 1974–75. La villa romana nelle *Epistulae ad Lucilium* di L. Anneo Seneca. *AquilNost* 45–46: 217–26.

- Volk, Katharina, and Gareth D. Williams, eds. 2006. *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics*. Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 28. Leiden.
- Westerath, Heinrich. 1938. *Die Fachausdrücke des Ackerbaues bei den römischen Agrarschriftstellern*. Osnabrück.
- White, David J. 2013. *Columella Res Rustica 10: A Study and Commentary*. PhD diss., University of Florida.
- White, K. D. 1970. *Roman Farming*. Ithaca, NY.
- . 1973. Roman Agricultural Writers I: Varro and His Predecessors. *ANRW* 1.4: 439–97.
- White, Michael J. 2003. Stoic Natural Philosophy (Physics and Cosmology). In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood, 124–52. Cambridge.
- Wildberger, Julia, and Marcia L. Colish, eds. 2014. *Seneca Philosophus*. Trends in Classics 27. Berlin.
- Wilkinson, L. P. 1950. The Intention of Virgil's *Georgics*. *GaR* 19.55: 19–28.
- . 1969. *The "Georgics" of Virgil: A Critical Survey*. London.
- . 1982. *Georgics*. In *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 2, *Latin Literature*, ed. E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen, 320–32. Cambridge.
- Williams, Gareth D. 2012. *The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca's "Natural Questions"*. Oxford.
- . 2015. Style and Form in Seneca's Writing. In *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro, 135–49. Cambridge.
- Zainaldin, James L., ed. Forthcoming. *Gargilius Martialis: The Agricultural Fragments*. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries. Cambridge.