Seneca: A New German Icon?¹

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The scholarly revival accelerated by the 1965 celebrations commemorating Seneca's death in A.D. 65 was accompanied in Germany by a remarkable surge of literary interest in the Roman philosopher. This article, beginning with a mid-century example, surveys the stages of that interest and analyzes the reasons accounting respectively for each. A postwar generation of Christian humanists in West Germany focused on Seneca as a proto-Christian while a younger generation of Marxist writers in the East saw in him primarily the model for a life of freedom and dignity under tyranny. The most recent generation in a unified Germany shares with Seneca the radical ethical criticism of his society. Günter Grass's novel örtlich betäubt (1969), the most immediate response to the 1965 celebrations and anticipating the stage of ethical criticism, constitutes a shrewd analysis of the responses to Seneca in three generations of West Germans.

The Senecan Revival

The 2003 year-end issue of the German weekly Die Zeit featured a quiz on the word-of-the-year: Sparen ("saving").² With only three exceptions, the sixteen passages to be identified came from such familiar German-language writers as Goethe, Theodor Fontane, and Karl Kraus. The exceptions were Shakespeare, Henry Ford, and—Seneca, who was represented by a pastiche of quotations from Ad Helviam matrem de consolatione (x-xi). It is unlikely that the compiler expected many of his readers to identify the passage, but the fact that Seneca, alone among writers from classical antiquity, should have appeared in such a context suggests at the very least that his name is not unknown to contemporary German readers, a fact that could not readily be taken for granted in most other countries of the Western world.

Seneca's reputation had already recovered to a certain extent from the widespread condemnation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that T. S. Eliot lamented in his 1927 essay on "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation": "in modern times, few Latin authors have been more consistently damned."³ As Nietzsche joked in 1882, in a poem entitled Seneca et hoc genus omne:

Das schreibt und schreibt sein unaussteh-
lich weises Larifari,
Als galt es primum scribere,
Deinde philosophari.⁴

¹. Once again I am happy to express my gratitude to Professor Wolfgang Haase for the thoughtful incisiveness with which he read my manuscript, and to him as well as the anonymous reader for useful bibliographical suggestions.

(Seneca and his ilk: they write their insufferably wise nonsense as though what mattered were first to write and only then to think.)

As late as 1936 H. J. Rose, in his widely consulted Handbook of Latin Literature, admitted that he found it hard to judge Seneca’s works fairly “owing to the loathing which his personality excites” —a loathing stemming primarily from what has often been regarded as his hypocrisy regarding money matters and the contradiction between his precepts and his example.

Since the 1965 commemorations of the nineteenth centenary of his death, however, the situation has changed appreciably. Seneca has attracted a significant amount of respectful scholarly attention, beginning with the four volumes of contributions generated by that occasion. The revitalization of Sênequismo has been especially lively in his native Spain, where in 1965 George Uscatescu hailed the Roman poet as “our contemporary” and, more recently, Maria Zambrano stressed the still vital quality of his thought.

William M. Calder III has recently drawn attention to the “remarkable revival of interest in Seneca” among Anglo-American scholars during the last two decades of the twentieth century, where as late as 1973 Anna Lydia Motto deplored the dearth of studies. The same phenomenon has been observed in Italy, where Italo Lana wondered in 1989 “Perché un così vivo interesse, oggi, per Seneca?”

The scholarly revival has also been conspicuous in Germany, beginning with two notable dissertations completed in the centenary year 1965 in Berlin and Heidelberg as well as Ernst Glaser-Gerhard’s two-volume translation of the Briefe an Lucilius in the popular series of Rowohl Klassiker. The next five years witnessed an outpouring of dissertations and

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