Seneca, On Leisure

Translated by Timothy Chandler

Translator's Note

Ad [Serenum] de otio (To Serenus on Leisure) comprises the fragmentary remains of a philosophical dialogue (what we would now call an essay) written by the Roman Stoic Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BC–AD 65) and thought to be addressed to his younger friend or relative Annaeus Serenus.¹ The date of its composition is uncertain but it is usually put at around AD 62, after the author's withdrawal from public life under the increasingly volatile Emperor Nero.²

Two reasons justify the following translation. Firstly, this remarkable text is very rarely included in compilations of Seneca's work, missing from both the Penguin and Oxford selections; as a result, the most readily available translation perhaps remains that of J.W. Basore's Loeb from 1932.³ The only published recent translation is that of J.M. Cooper and J.F. Procopé (1995), who translate the title as On the Private Life and preserve some of the more old-fashioned language of Basore.⁴ The only modern edition of the Latin text with English commentary is G.D. Williams's, which was published in 2003 and was the text used for this translation.

The second reason concerns the translation itself. While there is not the space to compare closely my translation with the existing ones (all good in their own way), there are a few points worth making. Firstly, I have occasionally provided Latin words in square brackets where I believe it is of i-
terest. While I have chosen the standard translations for terms such as res publica (commonwealth) and sapiens (sage) consistently, other instances called for a less straightforward translation, as for example with ratio at 2.1. Secondly, I have retained the title On Leisure in contrast to Cooper and Procopé as I do not share their belief that “leisure” is a misleading translation of otium. If anything, I think “private life” is too restrictive, but the choice makes sense in the context of their edition. As one of the most privileged paratextual marks, a title goes a great way towards determining how a text will be read, and in this case may also affect its accessibility. Thirdly, unlike Cooper and Procopé I have avoided the insertion of subheadings, which I think intrude unnecessarily on the flow of the essay.

The chief point of difference, however, is of greater significance as it pertains to a central issue in Stoic ethics. Unlike my predecessors, I have decided to spell “nature” without a capital letter and to use the neuter pronoun when referring to it in place of the feminine one. While Seneca certainly personifies nature in this text (as elsewhere), and while it is true that natura is a feminine noun, these details do not by themselves justify the use of the feminine in English, a usage which is surely approaching obsolescence. This is not merely an exercise in political correctness. Rather, it comes from a desire to interrupt a too easy assimilation of the Stoic concept of nature into a feminised object of neoclassical fancy. Scholars have noted the polyvalence of nature in Seneca’s work, but it should not be so easy to separate each usage into discrete senses. For all the rhetorical conviction that such techniques as personification effect, nature remains, I sense, a vague and impersonal force, divine, certainly, but totally inhuman.
On Leisure

Seneca the Younger

... by force of popular opinion they promote vices to us. Even if we try no other medicine, withdrawal in itself will be beneficial: we will be better when alone. Moreover, then we may withdraw among the best men and choose some example towards which we may turn our lives. This only comes about in leisure: then it is possible to maintain what pleases once and for all, where no-one interrupts who would pervert a still weak judgement with popular assistance; then life can go forward with one even, steady course [tenor], life, which we tear apart with the most contradictory purposes. For among all other evils, it is the worst when we change the vices themselves. Thus we do not even succeed in this, namely, persisting with a vice that is already familiar. One thing after another pleases then troubles us, because our judgements are not only incorrect but also fickle. We are tossed about and clutch at one thing after another, we cast aside what we sought, seek again what we cast aside, oscillating between our desire and remorse. For we depend entirely upon the judgements of others and that seems best to us which many seek and praise, rather than that which should be sought or praised; nor do we judge a route good or bad of itself, but by the crowd of one-directional footprints.

You reply, “What are you saying, Seneca? Are you deserting your party? Surely your Stoics say, ‘Right up to the very end of life we shall be in motion, we should not cease working for the common good, helping individuals, giving strength even to our enemies with our elderly hand. We are those who give no years to exemption from military service and, as that most eloquent man said, “We conceal our grey hair with a helmet” [Virgil, Aeneid 9.612]. We are among those for whom, right up until death, there is no leisure, so that if a circumstance is to be borne, death itself would not be leisure.’ Why are you discussing the teachings of Epicurus in the very
camps of Zeno? If you have misgivings about your party, why don’t you desert it altogether rather than betray it?” I will reply to you straightaway with this: “Surely all you want is that I show myself to be like my teachers? What then? I shall go not whither they have sent me, but whither they have led.”

Now I will prove to you that I am not deserting the teachings of the Stoics; for not even they were inconsistent, and I should nevertheless be fully excused if I follow their examples rather than their teachings. I will divide my discussion into two parts: firstly, that someone can, perhaps from the first stage of life, surrender entirely to the contemplation of truth, to seek a coherent intellectual basis \([\textit{ratio}}\) for living and to train himself in private; secondly, that someone has the full right \([\textit{iure optimo}}\) to do this at a far-advanced age, when his service is completed, and pass it onto others while his mind is sharpest, in the way of the Vestal virgins, who, their years of service divided between duties, learn to perform the rites and once they have learnt them, teach.

I will show that this also finds acceptance with the Stoics, not because I have made it my rule to undertake nothing against a word of Zeno’s or Chrysippus’s, but because the simple fact of the matter allows me to support their opinion. And if anyone follows the opinion of one alone, it is not into the curia but the faction. Indeed, if only everything were already understood, truth clear and generally accepted, and we never varied from these principles! Now we seek the truth along with those who themselves teach it.

Though in this matter the two schools—the Epicureans and the Stoics—differ greatly, really the different paths of both lead to leisure. Epicurus says: “The sage will not take part in politics unless it is unavoidable.” Zeno says, “The sage \textit{will} take part in politics unless it is unavoidable.” Both seek leisure as a consequence, both for good reason; this reason, however, extends broadly. If the commonwealth is so corrupt that it cannot be helped, if it is overrun with evils, the sage will not strive against trifles nor will he be useful if he expends himself for nothing. If he has too little influence \([\textit{auc-toritas}}\) or power \([\textit{uires}}\), the commonwealth will not allow him to act; if illness impedes him, just as he would not launch a worn-out ship onto the sea, and just as he would not enlist himself for military service if a cripple, so he would not embark on a journey which he knows to be unwieldy. Therefore even one for whom all the options are still open is able, before he has experienced any bad weather, to remain in safety and commit himself continuously to liberal studies \([\textit{boni artes}}\) and spend his leisure freely, a cultivator of virtues, which can be practised even by those farthest from public life. Of course, this leisure is spent by a man so that he may (if possible) benefit many men, and if not, a few, if not then, those closest to him, and if not then, himself. For when he makes himself beneficial to the rest of
society he performs a public service \textit{[negotium]}. Just as one who makes himself worse not only harms himself but also all those to whom he may have been useful had he made himself better, so anyone who serves himself well, by this very act benefits others because he provides that which will benefit them.

We should try to comprehend two commonwealths: one great and truly common to all, by which gods and men are held together and in which we should not look for this or that out-of-the-way place but the boundaries of a city as measured by the course of the sun; and another in which we are included by accident of birth, which may be that of the Athenians or of the Carthaginians or any other city which does not reach out to include all men but only specific ones. Certain individuals give service to both commonwealths at the same time, to the greater and to the lesser; some only to the lesser, others only to the greater. We can serve devotedly this greater commonwealth even in leisure, or indeed probably better in leisure, for then might we contemplate what virtue is, whether it is one or many, whether nature or the arts make men good; whether that which encloses the seas and lands and those things attached to seas and lands is one, or many bodies of the same kind which god scatters; whether all matter from which the universe is formed is continuous, without intervals of space, or dispersed as emptiness mixed with solid matter; what kind of abode a god has, looking upon his work in detachment or actively controlling it, whether he encompasses it from without or is implanted in the whole; whether the world is immortal or to be reckoned among perishable things and things born at a certain time. What does the contemplator of these things have to offer a god? A witness to so much of his work!

We are accustomed to say that the highest good is to live according to nature: nature produced us for two purposes, both the contemplation of things and action. Now we will prove the former of these claims. What more is there to say? Will this not have been proved if each individual asks himself how much he desires to know the unknown? how excited he becomes at every tale? Some set sail and bear steadfastly the toils of the farthest wandering for the sole reward of learning something hidden and distant. Such a thing brings people together for spectacles, drives them to pry open hidden things, to inquire after secrets, to uncover the past, to hear of the ways of savage peoples. Nature has given us a curious temperament and, conscious of its own skill and beauty, has made us the viewers of such great and spectacular things; for nature would lose the pleasure of itself if so great, so brilliant, so finely wrought, so shining and so diversely beautiful things were displayed in solitude. In order to know that it wanted to be gazed upon and not merely glanced at, look at the place which it has given
us: it has placed us in the central part of itself and given us a surrounding view of everything; it has not just made man upright, but also, intending to make him fit for contemplation, so that he can follow the gliding constellations as they rise and fall and spread his gaze around the whole thing, it has made an uplifted head for him and placed it on a flexible neck; then bringing forth six star-signs per day and six per night, it has revealed to view no insignificant part of itself, so that through these things which it has produced for his eyes it rouses keen interest in all the rest. For we do not behold all things, nor the full extent of things, but our sight reveals to itself a path of investigation and lays the foundations for truth, so that inquiry may cross from the manifest to the obscure and discover something more ancient than this world itself: whence those stars of ours sprung forth; what the condition of the universe was before individual things were divided into parts; what cause separated things that had been plunged into darkness and disorder; who assigned places to things—did heavy things fall by their own nature and light things fly up, or rather, apart from the pressure on and weight of their bodies, did a force higher than any other lay down the law for individuals?—whether the attempt to prove that men are of the divine spirit is true, namely that a part leapt down onto the earth just as some sparks from the stars do and became fixed to an alien place. Thought breaks through the defences of heaven and is not content to know what is shown. “I explore,” it says, “that which lies beyond the world, whether there is boundless immensity or if this itself is enclosed by limits of its own. What would the condition be of the things which are excluded? Would they be shapeless and jumbled things, occupying the same space in every direction, or would they too be divided up into another cosmos? Are they contiguous with this world or have they been distantly separated from it and this one revolves in a vacuum? Is it from atoms that everything born and about to be is composed, or is its material continuous and changeable throughout the whole? Are there opposing elements or ones that do not fight but harmonise in different ways?” The one born to seek these things: calculate how much time he does not have, even if he claims it entirely for himself. Although he suffers nothing to be taken from him with ease, nothing to slip away through carelessness, although he watches his hours scrupulously and marches on to the very end of the human life-span and fortune does not shake anything which nature established through him — nevertheless, man is too mortal for the thinking of that which is immortal. Therefore, I live in accordance with nature if I have given myself wholly to it, if I am an admirer and servant of it. Nature, however, wants me to do two things, both to act and to be free for contemplation: I do both, since indeed there is no contemplation without action.
“But it is important,” you say, “whether you took contemplation up just for the sake of pleasure, seeking nothing from it other than continual contemplation without result; for it is sweet and has its own seductions.” Against this I reply to you thus: It is important that you participate in political life with a balanced frame of mind, or you would always have no peace of mind and never take any time for yourself by which your attention may pass from the human to the divine. Just as desiring things without any love of virtues, just as toiling alone without cultivating ability, is hardly commendable (for those things ought to be brought together and mixed), so virtue given up to leisure without action is an imperfect and idle good, never showing what it has learnt. Who denies that virtue ought to try its progress out in action and not just deliberate on what is to be done, but also, at last, decisively and make real [ad uerum perducere] what has been contemplated? But if through wisdom itself there is no delay, if a doer is not missing but things to be done are, surely you allow such a man to be by himself? In what frame of mind does the sage withdraw to leisure? In the knowledge that he may there benefit posterity too with the things he is about to do. We are certainly those who say that Zeno and Chrysippus did greater things than if they had led armies, achieved the honour of public office or made laws, which they made not for one city but altogether for the human race. So, then, why ever should such leisure not suit a good man, through which he regulates [ordinet] ages to come and does not address himself to a few but to all men of every kind, all who are and who will be. To sum up, I ask whether Cleanthes, Chrysippus and Zeno lived according to their rules. You will no doubt answer that they lived just as they said life ought to be lived—and yet not one of them was employed in the commonwealth. “Theirs was not,” you say, “the fortune or the status which usually admits one to the management of the commonwealth.” But the same men nonetheless did not lead an indolent life, they nonetheless found how much more their own kind of quietude benefited men than the hustle and sweat of others. Therefore and nonetheless, they can be seen to have done much, though they did nothing publicly.

Moreover, there are three kinds of life, and the best of these is usually sought: one is devoted to pleasure, the second to contemplation and the third to action. In the first place, however, when we put aside the philosophical disputes, put aside the hatred, my statement does not actually reconcile with those following these different courses; for we may see how all three kinds of life—under this name or that—come to the same thing: he who sanctions pleasure is not without contemplation, he who is devoted to contemplation is not without pleasure, and he who sets his life for action is not without contemplation. “The most important distinction,” you say, “is
whether a thing is intended or the by-product of some other intention." This of course would be the great distinction; however, the one is not without the other: this man does not contemplate without action, nor does this one act without contemplation; a third man—whom we have agreed to judge poorly—does not value idle pleasure but achieves for himself by reason a pleasure which is steadfast. Thus even the path of pleasure itself takes place in action. How could it not take place in action, when even Epicurus declares that he might sometime withdraw from pleasure and go after pain, if regret will follow pleasure or less pain will be assumed in place of something more severe? What is the point of saying these things? To show that contemplation pleases all; while others have it as a goal, for us it is an anchorage, but never a harbour.

Now add to this the fact that, according to the rule of Chrysippus, the life of leisure is permissible—and I do not mean that one endures leisure, but that one chooses it. Our party refuses that the sage should take part in just any commonwealth. Why is it important how the sage comes to leisure (whether because the commonwealth fails him or he fails the commonwealth—if we could suppose that the commonwealth fails all sages)? But it will always fail those seeking with a critical eye. I ask, in which commonwealth would a sage participate? That of the Athenians, where Socrates is condemned to death and which Aristotle flees lest he be condemned to the same fate? In which jealousy oppresses virtues? You will tell me that the sage does not participate in this commonwealth. So is the sage to take part in the commonwealth of the Carthaginians, in which there is constant strife and licence makes it dangerous for every good man, where there is the greatest contempt for justice and the good, where inhuman cruelties are inflicted on enemies, even treating its own as enemies? And this he flees. If I wanted to survey each one, I would find none that can endure the sage and none that the sage can endure. But if that commonwealth which we imagine for ourselves cannot be found, leisure turns out to be necessary for all, because the one thing that could have been preferred to leisure is non-existent. If someone tells me to sail on the course that is best, then says not to sail on the sea where shipwrecks tend to occur and sudden storms often arise that tear the pilot off-course, unless I am mistaken, this man forbids me to set sail, however much he praises sailing....
NOTES

1 I would like to thank the journal’s anonymous reader, whose considered response improved the translation and accompanying note greatly, and many of whose suggestions on individual points of translation have been incorporated.

2 For discussion of dates and further background, see G.D. Williams’s introduction to Seneca, *De Otio; De Brevitate Vitae* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
