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Haunting Nepos: *Atticus* and the Performance of Roman Epicurean Death

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Abstract:

This paper, written for *Hedonic Reading*, a collection on Epicurean reception I am co-editing with Brooke Holmes of Princeton, reads the famous death of T. Pomponius Atticus (as recounted in Cornelius Nepos) against a backdrop of other Stoic and Epicurean deaths. It develops the figure of “haunting” as a way of speaking about the absent presence of Epicureanism in *Atticus*, which strikingly never mentions that philosophy by name – despite the fact that Atticus himself was one of the most well-known Epicureans of the Late Roman Republic. Its reading of Atticus’ death suggests that the biography’s greatest Epicurean traces may be found – rather than in the letter of the text – in the ways in which the details of Atticus’ death fail to conform to the Stoicizing interpretation Nepos’ himself offers. That is, the work is anti-teleological (and thus Epicurean) in its resistance to the clear, teleological (Stoic) reading offered within the biography itself. The paper is thus interested in developing “Epicurean” notions of reading, which – if not entirely adumbrated in antiquity – are potentially present in moments such as Lucretius’ comparison of letters and atoms, where the composition of the world and the composition of the text are juxtaposed.

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Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen. Mit anderen Worten: *es ist die Naturgeschichte*, auf welche seine Geschichten zurückverweisen.¹

Ancient Rome was fascinated by the performance of death.² Apart from any popular, modern-day image of conquering Romans or gladiatorial contests, the classical literary record provides copious evidence of this fascination. From the Punic Wars to the reign of Theodoric, from Naevius and Ennius to Boethius, the literature of Rome is marked by countless dramatic – and dramatically staged – murders and suicides. Perhaps most famously within the traditional narrative of ancient philosophy, Cato the Younger (Marcus Porcius Cato), a Stoic, kills himself with his own sword rather than submit to the tyranny of Caesar.³ Similarly, Tacitus, the great historian of Imperial Rome, recounts the prolonged, forced suicide of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, another Stoic and one-time tutor of the emperor Nero.⁴ Given the prominence of such scenes, it is hardly surprising that Epicureanism in its Roman manifestation also focuses upon death. Of course, death – or, more properly, release from the fear of death – is a central concern of all Epicureanism,⁵ but Roman Epicureanism, as voiced through texts like Philodemus' *De morte* ("On Death") and the third and sixth books of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things"), investigates this concern

¹ Benjamin 1977: 450. Emphasis added. ("Death is the sanction of all that, which the story-teller can report. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words: his stories refer back to *the story of nature*.")

² Death in ancient Rome has, accordingly, a large bibliography. To cite only a handful of recent works, cf. Edwards 2007, Edwards 2005, Connors 1994. Suicide will be a major concern in later sections of this paper; on that topic, cf. Gris  1982, Hirzel 1908, Griffin 1986a, 1986b.

³ This story will be discussed below. It is most thoroughly recounted at Plutarch *Cato minor* 66-73. Other versions of it occur at Appian *Bellum Civile* 2.98-99; Cassius Dio 43.11.4-5; Florus 2.13; Livy *Perochiae* 114; *Bellum Africanum* 88.3-4. Cf. Edwards 2007 and Martial 1.78 for a reading of this death as a (or even the) "Roman death" (*Romana mors*).

⁴ *Annales* 15.60-64. Peter Paul Reubens later immortalized this event in his painting *The Death of Seneca* (c. 1608), which depicts Seneca's final bath.

⁵ For the oft-stated Epicurean tenet that "Death is nothing to us," cf. e.g. Epicurus *Principal Doctrines* 2 (ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς); Lucretius *De rerum natura* 3.830-31 (*nil igitur mors ad nos*). A convenient collection of Epicurean texts on death is Long and Sedley 1987 §24.

more intensely and with greater psychological depth than other moments in the history of Epicureanism.⁶ The present essay, while it does not provide a full treatment of Roman Epicureanism, nonetheless examines a single text for which that philosophy and its intense investigation of death is an essential backdrop.

To be more specific, this essay pursues a reading of Cornelius Nepos' *Atticus* that looks not at the ways in which Nepos directly presents Epicurean doctrine but rather at the ways his text is, we may say, "haunted" by that doctrine.⁷ "Haunting" is an appropriate term for the type of textual performance traced here – both because it is closely connected with the thematics of death under study and because it captures the fact that Nepos' biography is not, strictly speaking, an Epicurean work. Titus Pomponius Atticus, the famous correspondent of Cicero depicted in *Atticus*, was himself an Epicurean, but Nepos' representation of him strikingly omits any explicit mention of this fact.⁸ Moreover, Nepos' writing – far from being a committed philosophical treatise – owes much to tropes of the Roman biographical genre of which *Atticus* is, at least within the surviving Latin record, one of the earliest examples.⁹ Epicureanism thus haunts *Atticus*, for – without being a named force behind the text – it leaves undeniable traces of its presence.

⁶ Cf. Segal 1990, which – in the context of a comparison of Epicurus' and Lucretius' views of death – suggests that Lucretius "reveals, far more vividly than Epicurus does, how much additional and unnecessary agony we inflict on ourselves through our anxiety about death" (41).

⁷ One touchstone within recent critical discourse for the study of "haunting" is Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and the "hauntology" he develops there. While the use here made of "haunting" is my own, it is made with some debt to Derrida's work. Cf. Derrida 1994.

⁸ For references to Atticus' Epicureanism, cf. Cicero *ad Atticum* 4.6.1; *De legibus* 1.21; 1.54; 3.1; *De finibus* 5.3. Cf. further Leslie 1950 (with Bailey 1951) and Castner 1988: 57-61, with her bibliography. Lindsay 1998 also comments on the absence of explicit discussion of Epicureanism in *Atticus*, suggesting that this fact may reveal an aversion to philosophy on the part of Nepos (cf. Lactantius *Divinae institutiones* 3.15.10) or negative cultural associations of Epicureanism.

⁹ In attempting to define Nepos' authorial project, commentators often point to the following passage, where he suggests a distinction between his own biographical genre and history (*Pelopidas* 1.1): "Pelopidas the Theban is better known to historians than to the public. I am unsure in what manner I should expound his virtues, for I fear that – if I should begin to lay out events (*res*) – I would seem not to tell his biography (*vitam*) but to write history (*historiam*)." Cf. Titchener 2003: 85-88. For more on Nepos' place in the ancient biographical tradition, cf. Geiger 1985, Tuplin 2000.

The present essay aims primarily to read the dramatic death scene that concludes *Atticus* in conjunction with an analysis of the role played by Epicurean doctrine in the text. To this end, the essay first examines, in a preliminary gesture, earlier portions of the biography as well as other relevant cultural and philosophical material, which together help set the terms negotiated by the concluding death scene. Above all, the discussion suggests ways in which Epicureanism undermines any simple notion of “natural,” intentional action. *Atticus*’ presentation of biographical events, up to and including the protagonist’s death, is colored extensively by fortune (*fortuna*) – a fortune whose movement is, if not synonymous with chance, nonetheless difficult to assimilate fully, as the text once claims, to the habits (*more*s) of Titus Pomponius Atticus. In other words, as the following pages explore, the ghost of Epicureanism is perhaps felt most strongly in *Atticus*’ inability to separate fortune (*fortuna*) from its etymological relative, chance (*fors/forte*).¹⁰

I. Writing the Life: Narrative, Epicureanism, and *Fortuna*

Biography – including Roman biography – is perhaps the most teleologically overdetermined genre of narrative.¹¹ As a “writing of the life,” a writing that tries to represent and conform to the structure of life, it begins with birth, and it drives towards death. This fact explains, at least on a narrative level, the persistent presence of death in life. Even

¹⁰ We might even say that *forte* is a “crypt-word” for *Atticus*, since – though it is never used explicitly – it seems to lie at the center of the work’s concerns. “Crypt-word” is a term that owes something to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and their study of Freud’s Wolf Man (Abraham and Torok 1986), where they develop their notion of “cryptonymy”; but *forte* in *Atticus* hardly has the phonic charge of the word-thing *tieret* that lies at the center of Abraham and Torok’s analysis. The role and scope of chance in Epicureanism is a topic that has attracted a fair amount of scholarly discussion, particularly with regard to the *clinamen*, or “swerve”; however, the sense in which *forte* is used here – “undesigned, unintended, random” – needs little discussion. On the possibly limited scope of the *clinamen* itself in Epicureanism, cf. Chapter 8 in Long 2006.

¹¹ The work of Peter Brooks (esp. Brooks 1984 and 1994) constitutes perhaps the most impressive modern attempt to describe the psychological functioning of narrative and teleological narrative drives. Although Brooks takes Freud (esp. the Freud of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”) as his primary theoretical touchstone in forming his model for narrative, it is possible that Hellenistic philosophy provides a similar, if still divergent, life narrative. For example, the “natural” pursuit of pleasure posited by Epicureanism (from the cradle onward) is reminiscent, in some ways, of psychoanalytic thinking.

without a highly theorized model of life narratives (or life as narrative), it is impossible to ignore the role that the stopping point holds for the telling of a life. Solon the Athenian famously held that one cannot evaluate a life until it is over.¹² And while Nepos, in authoring his own *Vitae*, may not have had so explicit a philosophy, the drive towards a concluding death is still constantly anticipated throughout *Atticus*. Indeed, death – if not always Atticus’ own – appears, quite literally, as early as the second chapter of the work, where Atticus’ father “perishe[s] early” (2.1: *mature decessit*), and death lingers in the background throughout much of the biography. We learn, for example, that – during the days of Cinna and Sulla – Atticus himself is not “apart from danger” (2.1: *expers...periculi*), and he appears to have gone into exile to escape possible death.¹³ Moreover, Atticus later (10.1-2) fears finding his name on the list of those proscribed to death when Antony returns to Italy.

Yet if biographical narrative drives towards death, and if death lurks beneath much of Atticus’ biography, Epicureanism – at least in *Atticus* – may serve to draw us away from death. Not only may Epicureanism, if successful in its oft-stated aims, assuage fear of impending death, but its anti-teleology, most commonly understood in connection with the world’s aimlessness, its lack of designed order, may also be associated with a resistance to the drive of narrative and the order imposed upon life by narrative.¹⁴ While it should not be taken for granted that the writing of a life – specifically the writing of Atticus’ life – conforms to an Epicurean understanding of the un-designed nature of that life, there are

¹² Cf. Herodotus *Historiae* 1.32: “And if...he shall end his life well, this man is the one you seek: he is worthy of being called blessed...” (εἰ δὲ...τελευτήσῃ τὸν βίον εὖ, οὗτος ἐκεῖνος τὸν σὺ ζητεῖς, <ὁ> ὄλβιος κεκλησθῆναι ἀξιός ἐστι...)

¹³ As Nepos puts it, he went into exile “after he perceived...that the means of living in accordance with dignity was not granted to him” (2.2: *posteaquam vidit...neque sibi dari facultatem pro dignitate vivendi...*). On Atticus’ exile (esp. as a literary precursor to Ovid’s exile), cf. Hallett 2003: 348-52.

¹⁴ For Epicurean anti-teleology, cf. e.g. *De rerum natura* 2.1052-57, Long and Sedley 1987 §13.

numerous instances where Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, a poem known to Nepos, suggests a connection between the composition of the world and the composition of his work, most famously through his comparison of letters and atoms.¹⁵ In this sense, Epicureanism may be seen in the many detours and evasions of *Atticus*' plot, its many attempts at resisting the dramatic conclusion that readers know – from the opening lines onward – surely awaits. The biography maintains and augments its narrative pleasures through constantly holding out the possibility that its inevitable conclusion (*fortuna*) is subject to the whims of chance (*forte*).¹⁶ Indeed, fortune (*fortuna*) and the question of chance (*fors/forte*) are not only possible formal preoccupations of *Atticus* but also, as we shall soon see, central thematic concerns of the biography.

Before we further probe the ways in which chance appears both implicitly and explicitly within *Atticus*, though, it is worth briefly reviewing one other significant set of Epicurean traces within the work, if only to suggest that the Epicurean associations of chance appear far from random.¹⁷ Perhaps the most obviously Epicurean feature of the biography is Atticus' "retreat from politics," his reluctance to commit himself to "the tides

¹⁵ For Nepos' knowledge of Lucretius, cf. *Atticus* 12.4, which mentions the death of the poets Catullus and Lucretius. For the letter-atom passages, cf. *De rerum natura* 1.197, 1.824, 1.912, 2.688, 2.1013. Cf., too, Gale 2004b: 62, which explains the "abrupt" conclusion of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* by alluding to two Epicurean concerns – (1) freedom from the fear of death/religion (since death is final and unperceived) and (2) anti-teleology (since the world, and therefore the poem, lacks a "divine" creator): "I have already suggested that the framing of the poem as a whole...suggests that it represents the story of a life. In this sense, it makes sense for the poem to just stop: Lucretius has insisted that death is the end, and in the same way, nothing can follow the poem's last full stop. Again, if the poem represents the universe...the abruptness could be seen as appropriate: since the universe is infinite, but the poem cannot go on for ever, any stopping point is equally arbitrary..."

¹⁶ To be clear, although death is both the "natural" and expected end to the biography, various events seem to appear, as if by chance (e.g. civil war "intercedes" [7.1], further war is waged [9.1], fortune suddenly changes [10.1]), creating a sense that – although the biography must end – its narrative is hardly governed by a logical progression. For a sense of the wandering structure of *Atticus*, cf. the "schema" of Horsfall (1989: 9-10), which makes clear that the biography is, if at times roughly chronological, at other times hardly temporally structured at all, instead largely generalizing about Atticus' character.

¹⁷ If Nepos' statement is correct (17.3), we should both expect that there are philosophical ghosts lurking in *Atticus* and that those ghosts will be submerged into the *life* of Atticus (rather than, e.g., explicitly expressed in some set of doctrines): "He [*sc.* Atticus] had so understood the teachings of the chief philosophers that he used them for leading his life, not for show."

of civic life” (6.1: *civilibus fluctibus*).¹⁸ This political retreat not only conjures up a famous image from Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* – that of the wise man who gazes upon the troubles of another, watching from the shore “while winds disturb the waters on the great sea” (*De rerum natura* 2.1: *...mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis...*) – but it also calls to mind many of Epicurus’ descriptions of the wise man. The wise man, for example, neither intends “to take part in government” (πολιτεύεσθαι) nor “to rule as a monarch” (τυραννεύσειν).¹⁹ Even the specific terms employed by Nepos to describe his politics may conjure up the Garden, e.g. “tranquility” (6.5: *tranquillitas*), “quiet” (7.3: *quies*).²⁰

Whatever the validity of such lexical arguments, if Nepos seems at times to encourage reading Atticus as an Epicurean, he balances that concern with a desire to resist misconceptions of Epicureanism – an indirect, “negative” confirmation of Epicureanism’s unstated presence.²¹ Atticus’ Epicurean retreat from politics is thus accompanied by details limiting his Epicureanism, or at least limiting any perception of stereotypical “Epicurean” excess. At the same time that Atticus avoids formal public office for the pleasures of his tranquil home, that home is certainly not – as stereotypes may suggest – a debauched pleasure garden. “There was never a dinner at his home,” Nepos writes, “without some reading – so that his guests might be delighted no less in their minds than in their stomachs”

¹⁸ Cf. *Atticus* 7.3, 8.4; *De rerum natura* 1.31, 3.18; Griffin 1986a: 76n6, who comments that the nautical imagery employed by Nepos is “in no way exclusive to the [Epicurean] sect” but “very reminiscent of...Cicero’s version of the Epicurean doctrine of abstention” at *De re publica* 1.1, 1.4, 1.9.

¹⁹ Diogenes Laërtius 10.119. For discussion of this tenet of Epicureanism, with a fuller list and discussion of ancient sources, cf. Fowler 1989: 122-26.

²⁰ Cf. Bailey 1951: 164. It is even possible to suggest that Nepos’ much-remarked (and much-maligned) prose style could be, if not Epicurean, at least satisfactory when viewed through an Epicurean lens. His style is, after all, clear, the chief attribute that Epicurus demanded in his *On Rhetoric* (Cf. Diogenes Laërtius 10.13). For a standard assessment of Nepos’ style, cf. Horfall 1989: 8: “The flat, awkward prose of a man with no taste, or time, or capacity for elegance...is in its way also telling: N. is uninventive, and his graceless language augments our sense of his essential honesty.”

²¹ “Balancing” seems to be a key feature of the rhetorical articulation of *Atticus*, which – as commentators have noted – is dominated by the figure of antithesis. Cf. Norden 1971: 206: “...Die Antithese, sowohl die der Gedanken wie die der Form, beherrscht die Darstellung...”

(14.1). Atticus has “no gardens” and “no sumptuous villa” (14.3). Nepos’ descriptions seem, then, to anticipate and resist contemporary images of Epicurean pleasure, images – for example – of Epicureans as (fat, well-fed) pigs.²²

But if *Atticus* balances Epicurean and anti-Epicurean (or anti-“Epicurean”) with regard to politics, the situation with regard to “fortune” (*fortuna*) is more complex. Although “fortune” (*fortuna*, sometimes *Fortuna*, a Roman deity), especially in the translated Greek form *tuche* (τύχη), is a common player in ancient biography of all periods, the term takes on a special significance in Nepos’ *Atticus*.²³ *Fortuna* appears repeatedly, in many guises, throughout the biography, with meanings ranging from “material wealth” to “fate.”²⁴ Most strikingly, two interrelated passages suggest it is within the power of men to shape their own “fortunes.” The first occurs concentrated in an unattributed poetic line:²⁵

He also recalled the good turns he perceived with an undying memory; and the favors, which he himself had granted, he remembered to the extent that the recipient was pleased. He thus brought it about that the saying appears true:

“For each among men, his habits (*mores*) fashion (*fungunt*) his fate (*fortunam*).”
Nevertheless, he did not fashion his fate (*fortunam*) before he fashioned himself – he, who feared lest he be punished justly in any matter. (11.5-6)

Several chapters later, in a pointedly repetitive gesture, Nepos refers back to this earlier claim:

²² For descriptions of Epicureans as pigs, cf. e.g. Cicero *In Pisonem* 37 (an attack), Horace *Epistulae* 1.4 (Epicurean self-mockery).

²³ The pair *fortuna/tuche* plays a particularly prominent role in Plutarch, on which cf. Swain 1989a, 1989b. For attempts to trace (or deny) a more general trajectory in Nepos’ use of *fortuna* (including works other than *Atticus*), cf. Havas 1985 and Jefferis 1943. As the rest of the present discussion should make clear, I have sympathies with Havas’ suggestion (503-4) that *fortuna* is strongly tied to “nature” (die Natur).

²⁴ *Fortuna* occurs fifteen times within *Atticus* (2.3; 3.3; 9.5 *bis*; 10.1; 10.2; 10.5; 11.1; 11.6 *bis*; 14.2; 19.1; 19.2; 19.3; 21.1). For comparison, *fortuna* appears no more than four times in any of the other *Vitae*, although it should be noted that *Atticus* is nearly twice the length of any other surviving biography from Nepos.

²⁵ This line (which in Latin runs *sui cuique mores fungunt fortunam hominibus*) appears as fr. xix of the uncertain lines in Ribbeck (ed.) 1898 (at 125). Horsfall 1989: 82-3 suggests the line may stem from the Comic poet Philemon.

I published the account to this point while Atticus was alive. Now, since fortune (*fortuna*) has desired (*voluit*) us to survive him, we shall continue with the remainder and, as much as we can, we shall teach (*docebimus*) readers with examples of things (*rerum exemplis*) that, just as we indicated above, quite often, for each, his habits (*mores*) match his fate (*fortuna*). (19.1)

These two passages constitute Nepos' most forceful, general attempts to read the *life* of Atticus, and they therefore serve as important clues as to how to read his death.

The first passage – through the vehicle of citation – describes a particular kind of ancient self-fashioning (*fingunt*).²⁶ The very notion of self-fashioning implicitly invests much into the (fashioning) agency of a subject. Yet here we find not, at least not initially, the notion that an individual (*homo*) creates himself (or even fashions his life) but that he, through his habits, creates his fate, his end, his “fortune” (even his “death”). This, at any rate, is the interpretation we reach if we take *fortuna* (here rendered by “fate”) as (*OLD* s.v. 8) “[w]hat befalls or is destined to befall one, one’s fate, destiny, fortunes.”²⁷ But the passage also suggests that there is continuity between the fashioning of fate and the fashioning of the individual. That is, an individual dies as he lives, and he – or so Nepos comments of Atticus – is, in some sense, *free* to fashion (and in the process of fashioning) himself.²⁸ This conjunction of the freedom of self-fashioning and a congruous, fashioned, if also fixed, “fate” has an undeniable Stoic coloring. Indeed, elsewhere, in explaining the Stoic tenet

²⁶ The literature on ancient self-fashioning is large (and growing); but any discussion must begin with the work of Michel Foucault (cf. Foucault 1984, 2005). (The work of Pierre Hadot, e.g. Hadot 1987, has a similar focus on practice, on “philosophy as a way of life.”) My own brief intervention into this topic has some resonances with Foucault’s discussion (2005: 477-80) of the *meletê thanatou* (“preparation for death”), which emphasizes the comments of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius that one should live each day as if it were the last, that, moreover, one should view oneself from the perspective of death. But my project is rather to show some of the dissonances between the (narrated) life and the (narrated) death of Atticus, to upset, so to speak, an easy equation between the way one lives and the way one dies.

²⁷ Horsfall (1989: 22) renders *fortuna* with “fortune.”

²⁸ This sentence articulates my understanding of the remark that Atticus “did not fashion fortune before himself” (*neque...prius fortunam quam se ipse finxit*). Atticus is thus, in a certain (Stoic) sense, “free” to fashion his fortune and himself simultaneously, even as these terms retain some fixity.

“that only the wise man is free, and every foolish man is a slave,” Cicero conjures up the same poetic line as Nepos:

What is freedom (*libertas*)? The ability to live as you wish (*ut velis*). Who, then, lives as he wishes except he who follows the correct path; he who delights in duty; he for whom the path of living has been considered and foreseen; he who obeys not even the laws out of fear but follows them and cultivates them because he judges this to be greatly beneficial; he who says nothing, does nothing, thinks, finally, nothing if not willingly and freely; he for whom all plans and all he does set out from and return to the same thing – nothing holds greater sway with him than his own will (*voluntas*) and judgment? To him even fortune herself (*fortuna ipsa*) – she who, it is said, possesses the greatest power – yields, if, as the wise (*sapiens*) poet has said, she is fashioned for each by his own habits (*moribus*).²⁹ (Cicero *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 5.34)

This passage introduces the key term “freedom” (*libertas*) – which, as we shall soon see, plays a substantial role in the present study of Atticus’ death.³⁰ Cicero’s definition of this term works to link “freedom” (*libertas*) to “will” (*voluntas*), but it does so in (Stoic) “paradoxical” fashion: “freedom” (*libertas*) is doing what one wants (*voluntas*), yet what one wants is “correct” and in accord with “duty” (*officium*). Will is “free” yet in accord with expectation and law. What is striking here is that, since “freedom” is effectively equated to “will,” while “will” is constrained “willingly” by “duty,” the movement from “habits” to “fate” (or “fortune”) becomes trivial, natural.

Yet is it possible that *fortuna* (“fate,” “fortune”) in *Atticus* is more than this Stoic gloss suggests? Are there other ways of configuring *fortuna* and *voluntas*? *Fortuna* can, of course, refer not only to “fate” but also to less “intended” or “intentional” consequences, i.e. (*OLD* s.v. 5) “[t]he way in which events fall out, the workings of fortune, chance(s), hazard(s).” Indeed, while it is hardly a refutation of the Stoic position, we may note that in the second passage it is *fortuna* (“fortune”) that “wished” (*voluit*) Nepos to survive Atticus rather than an

²⁹ Although the identity of the poet is unknown, the term “wise” (*sapiens*) often has Stoic connotations.

³⁰ Cf. *infra* pp. xx

individual human agent. On such a description, some “will” (*voluntas*) may coincide with “fate” (*fortuna*), but it is hardly presented as the free volition of a unique human self-fashioner. Such turns of phrase may be dismissed as conventional – *fortuna* (“fortune”), not unlike *natura* (“nature”), is regularly personified in Latin; but it is precisely this linguistic convention that should give us pause: the question of where to locate agency within “self-fashioning” does not seem – at least when considered on the material level of the written letter – entirely settled. (Is *fortuna* here an agent? A mere stand-in for chance?) The second passage above gives us, moreover, an arena in which to further probe this issue: it sets up Atticus’ death as an *exemplum* (“example”), an exemplary presentation of its own Stoicizing analysis.³¹ Parsing the role of agency within Atticus’ death thus offers an opportunity to further analyze the operation of “fortune” (*fortuna*) within Nepos’ text, and it therefore forms a central concern of the following section.

II. The “Art” of Dying: Narratives of Epicureanism and Stoicism

As suggested at the outset of this essay, Atticus’ death is but one among many within the surviving Roman literary corpus. The exemplary Roman death, one could say, forms a genre unto itself. And any literary consideration of Atticus’ final moments must attend to the tropes of the genre. The present section thus provides a brief, selective sketch of ancient “philosophical” deaths, specifically Stoic and Epicurean deaths, alongside its reading of Atticus’ own. It traces the details of various Stoic and Epicurean deaths in an attempt to locate the place, if any, of “willful” self-fashioning (and therefore “fortune”) – what we might call the art of dying – within those events. The analysis suggests, in contrast to Nepos’ own explicit reading, not only that there are Epicurean ghosts lurking in the byways

³¹ It is worth noting that Nepos wrote another work entitled *Exempla*. Cf. Marshall (ed.) 2001: 102-8.

of Nepos' account but also that these ghosts manifest themselves most strongly in the sudden operation of disease.

To construct a framework for Epicurean death, let us begin at the beginning, with the first Epicurean death – that of Epicurus himself. There are in fact multiple accounts of Epicurus' demise, but one in particular – as we can see clearly below – was current during the later Roman Republic.³² Two letters – one from Epicurus, one from Cicero – give the essential details:

Already dying, Epicurus writes this letter to Idomenes:

“Enjoying a blessed day, a day that is also the final one of my life, I write you the following: strangury and dysentery dog me, leaving no remnant of strength in my body. But, against all these things, the joy in my soul at the memory of our past dialogues is drawn up for battle. And you, in a fashion worthy of your attendance at my side from boyhood and of philosophy, attend to Metrodorus' children.” (Diogenes Laërtius 10.22)

Since I've been suffering from intestinal pain for nine days and since I failed to prove to those who want to enjoy my help that I am not well (because I didn't have a fever), I fled to my Tusculan villa, though for two days I had been so far from eating that I did not even taste water; and so, stricken with weakness and hunger, I desired your office more than I thought mine to be sought by you. I fear, moreover, all disease but especially that which the Stoics allow your master, Epicurus, with difficulty, since he says strangury and dysentery were burdensome for him; the first disease, they think, is from gluttony, the second from shameful intemperance. I had quite thoroughly dreaded dysentery; but it seemed to me that either a change of scenery or a relaxation of the mind or perhaps even the remission of a disease already growing old would be worth it. (Cicero *Letters to his Friends* 7.26.1, to Marcus Fabius Gallus)

Two features of these epistolary texts stand out: (1) the presence (and importance) of disease in Epicurus' text and (2) the corresponding Stoic interpretation of that disease offered by Cicero's letter.³³ On the one hand, dysentery and strangury dog Epicurus in his final moments, moments that, Epicurus' letter suggests, the philosopher heroically greeted with

³² For another version of Epicurus' death, cf. Diogenes Laërtius 10.16 (a poem), where the founder of the Kepos dies as the result of a hot bath.

³³ Cicero also translates this letter of Epicurus at *De finibus* 2.30 (96).

equanimity by virtue of recalling friendly dialogues. On the other, Cicero, addressing and no doubt gently needling his friend Marcus Fabius Gallus, an Epicurean, conjures up a decidedly less heroic Epicurus as a haunting precursor of his own guilty disease: he presents the Stoic sentiment that Epicurus' final moments were not a portrait of courage in the face of bodily revolt but the result of a life of gluttony and hedonistic living.³⁴ This Stoic interpretation, an unsympathetic overreading if not an outright misreading of the original symptoms, nonetheless throws into relief a debate we shall develop and pursue throughout this section: Stoic encounters with death emphasize the intentional control of the agent confronting death, while Epicurean accounts tend to portray, if not a helplessness, an indifferent acceptance of death.³⁵ Epicurus is thus, in Stoic eyes, the agent who brings about his own suffering rather than a serene observer of his body naturally taking its course.

Deaths of Stoic heroes are therefore generally not disease-filled, bed-ridden affairs but manly suicides.³⁶ Cato the Younger, perhaps the most famous Roman Stoic suicide, takes his own life instead of submitting to Julius Caesar for pardon. His final moments are portrayed by Seneca as follows:

I declare, I do not see what Jupiter has more beautiful on Earth, if he should desire to pay attention to it, than that he regard Cato, although his sides were broken many times, nonetheless standing upright amid public destruction. "Although everything has fallen to the sovereignty of one man," he says, "although the lands are guarded by legions, the seas by fleets, although a Caesarian soldier blockades the city gates, Cato has a way out: a single hand will create a broad avenue for liberty (*libertati*). This sword, though harmless and unstained by civil war, at last will provide good, noble deeds: that liberty (*libertatem*) which it could not provide for its country, it will grant to Cato.

³⁴ The Stoic interpretation of course also indicts Cicero of hedonistic living.

³⁵ Indeed, the portrait offered in Epicurus' dying letter – joyfully thinking of past friendly conversations – operates not by choosing some proper death but rather by ignoring death altogether (through memory).

³⁶ Among well-known Stoics, Cleanthes – who (like Atticus) perishes from starvation – seems to be an exception to this general tendency. For the life of Cleanthes, cf. Diogenes Laërtius 7.168-76 (death at 176). The masculine "gendering" of Stoicism is occasionally made quite explicit, cf. Seneca *De constantia sapientis* 1 on the "manly path" (*via virilis*) of the Stoics.

Draw near, my soul, the long-anticipated deed; remove yourself from human affairs....” (Seneca *De Providentia* 1.9-11)³⁷

In its portrayal of perhaps *the* Roman death, this passage theatrically recreates Cato’s dying words, emphasizing a single, familiar theme – *libertas* (“freedom”). *Libertas* here refers not merely to abstract liberty but to an ability to step outside the domain of Caesar’s rule, an ability, that is, to *choose* (*voluntas*) not to be governed. The strong geographical imagery – blockades, guarded lands, a broad avenue – vividly depicts the paradoxical Stoic theme: an internal, intentional choice re-configures a menacing external landscape. The interior will is mapped onto the geographical exterior, symbolically conflating death with intentional choice (*voluntas*), a choice that belongs to the agent desiring to step outside Caesar’s realm.

Such analysis makes it clearer why suicide (often called *mors voluntaria*, “voluntary death”) occupies a central place in Stoic mythology, while disease – as we have seen and will see again – remains a more properly Epicurean fascination.³⁸ Disease in Stoicism seems rather to characterize anti-heroes:

Scribonia, a venerable woman, was the aunt of Drusus Libo, a man as foolish as he was noble, with aspirations greater than anyone could desire in that age, and greater than he himself could desire in any age. When he was brought back sick from the senate on a bier with a not-too-full procession (since all his attendants had already impiously deserted him not as a criminal but as a corpse), he began to reflect upon whether he should commit suicide or await his death. To which Scribonia said, “Why do you enjoy doing others’ work?” She did not persuade him: he killed himself, and with good reason; for three or four days later, if alive, he was going to die by the plan of his enemy. He did another’s work. (Seneca *Epistulae Morales* 70.10)

³⁷ Cf. Plutarch *Cato Minor* 66, where a similar version of this narrative is recounted, and n3 (*supra*).

³⁸ While only a few instances of Epicurean disease are studied within the present essay, it is worth noting briefly the existence of further evidence on disease within surviving *Epicurea*. Plutarch (*Moralia* 22. 1103a), for example, records that Epicurus cared for Metrodorus, Polyainos, and Aristoboulos during their final illnesses. The Epicurean Metrodorus, moreover, wrote a work *On the Illness of Epicurus* (cf. Diogenes Laërtius 10.24), and we have reports of his own illness (Plutarch *Moralia* 16. 1097e; Celsus *De Medicina* 3.21), which Körte [Körte (ed.) 1890] took to derive from a work *De morbo suo* (“On his own illness”). This evidence (hardly a comprehensive selection) already gives a sense of the centrality of disease for Epicureanism. (For discussion of this evidence within the context of Epicurean school history, cf. Clay 1998: 64-67.)

Drusus Libo here is depicted as a fool for committing the same act as the heroic Cato. The difference between hero and fool is explained somewhat by the subsequent discussion:

And so you could not proclaim on this matter universally, whether – when an external force threatens death – it should be taken for oneself or awaited; for there are many situations that one can take either way. If one death is tormented, another simple and easy, why shouldn't one choose the latter? As I should choose a ship when intending to sail, or a home when intending to dwell, so I would choose my death when intending to depart from life.
(Seneca *Epistulae Morales* 70.11)

This passage makes clear Drusus Libo's folly. In killing himself, he was not creating *libertas*, not creating a new choice for himself – perhaps a choice not to die – but merely contemplating something he could not know: would it be easier to kill myself or perish from illness? And this question illustrates precisely what makes disease an uneasy fit for Stoic thinking: it is neither, as we shall see in the case of Atticus, entirely in nor entirely out of our control.

This backdrop of Stoic and Epicurean thinking at last prepares us to read Nepos' portrayal of the death of Atticus, a scene that – although it depicts the heroic death of a well-known Epicurean – nonetheless seems to borrow from both Stoic and Epicurean *exempla*.³⁹

When he had filled seventy-seven years (*septem et septuaginta annos*) in this fashion and grown to extreme old age no less through his dignity than through his kindness and good fortune – indeed, he obtained his many inheritances through nothing other than his goodness – and when he had enjoyed such greatly favorable health that he had not needed medicine for thirty years (*annis triginta*), he acquired an illness, which initially both he himself and his doctors disregarded; for they thought that it was “tenesmos” (Gk. *τεινεσμός*: a gripping pain in the bowels⁴⁰), for which swift, easy cures (*remedia celeria facilliaque*) were proposed. When he had passed three months (*tres menses*) in this condition without any pain (beyond what he felt from the cure itself), suddenly (*subito*) such a great, powerful sickness burst forth in his lower intestine that in the end (*extremo tempore*) pus-filled ulcers broke out across his loins. But before this happened to him, after he felt the onset of

³⁹ Such apparent philosophical “eclecticism,” if in itself uncomfortable, fits nicely with what we have seen thus far in *Atticus*: the biography combines Stoic analyses with (submerged) Epicurean details.

⁴⁰ Cf. Pliny NH 28.211: “*Tenesmos*, that is, a constant, vain desire for moving the bowels...” (*Tenesmos, id est crebra et inanis voluntas desurgendi...*)

his fever and his pains increasing day by day (*in dies*), he ordered his son-in-law Agrippa to approach him and, with him, Lucius Cornelius Balbus and Sextus Peducaeus. When he saw these were present, he leaned on his bed and said, “How much care and diligence I have applied in watching over my health in this time (*hoc tempore*) – since I have you as witnesses – it is in no way necessary to recall at length. Since, with these endeavors, I have made certain, I hope, that I have left nothing undone that pertains to improving my health, it remains that I take counsel with myself. All this, I did not want you to ignore; for it is my decision to leave off nourishing my disease. And I say this because – whatever food I have eaten these last days (*his diebus*) – I have prolonged my life in such a fashion that I have increased my pains without hope of health. Wherefore I seek from you, first that you approve my plan, then that you not try in vain (*frustra*) to obstruct me through dissuasion.”

He gave this speech with such constancy of voice (*constantia vocis*) and appearance that it seemed that he was departing not from life, but from one home for another. When Agrippa specifically, crying over him and kissing him, begged and beseeched that he not himself hasten (*acceleraret*) that death towards which nature was goading him, and – since even at this moment he could live beyond the crisis (*temporibus*) – that he preserve himself both for himself and his family, Atticus quelled Agrippa’s requests with quiet stubbornness. Thus, when he had abstained from food for two days (*biduum*), straightaway (*subito*) his fever subsided and his disease began to be lighter. Nevertheless, he carried out his plan all the same. And so on the fifth day (*die quinto*) after he had entered into his plan, the last day of March (*pridie kal. Aprilis*) when Gnaeus Domitius and Gaius Sosius were consuls, he died. He was carried away on a modest bier, as he himself had ordered, without any funeral procession, accompanied by all good men, with a great crowd. He was buried next to the Appian way at the fifth stone in the memorial of Quintus Caecilius, his maternal uncle. (*Atticus* 21-22)

This lengthy scene, aside from its obvious fascination with sickness, manifests an Epicurean character in its emphasis on the *sudden* action of disease. Disease appears or disappears for Atticus suddenly (*subito*), a characterization put into relief by the extensive temporal accounting within the passage (“seventy-seven years,” “thirty years,” “three months,” “day by day,” “last days,” etc.).⁴¹ Such suddenness is, moreover, hardly foreign to other tales of Epicurean illness. One of Lucretius’ characterizations of disease in his sixth book makes a

⁴¹ Alongside the temporal accounting, it is worth paying attention to the various references to speed within the passage (“swift remedies” [*remedia celeria*]; “hasten[ing]” of death [*acceleraret*]). *Subito* itself carries the double sense of “suddenly” (*OLD* s.v. 1) and “quickly” (*OLD* s.v. 2), thus manifesting notions of speed, unexpectedness, and short, abbreviated temporality.

similar point, explaining how the seeds, the atoms, of death can rapidly collide and suddenly (*repente*) manufacture illness.⁴² Likewise, although it provides an initial attempt at diagnosis, Atticus' death scene avoids any ultimate solution to the problem of disease, lingering instead in the vivid description of symptoms. As one stretch of Lucretius' famous account of the great Athenian plague shows, his account often prefers vividly cataloguing symptoms to the deeper reading, the reading "through" or "behind" of diagnosis, lingering upon surfaces rather than explaining them away.⁴³ Of course, disease for Lucretius has a reason, a principle, a *ratio*, but this *ratio* is nothing other than the chance (*casu, forte*) collision of atoms.

Alongside these identifiably, if not exclusively, Epicurean features, there are aspects of Atticus' death that remind one more of Stoicism. "Constancy" (*constantia*), Atticus' even

⁴² Lucretius *De rerum natura* 6.1090-97:

Now I shall lay clear what the principle (*ratio*) is for diseases,
or whence it's possible that the power of disease, straight from (*repente*) having arisen,
causes death-dealing slaughter, for humankind and packs of beasts.
First, I've shown above what are the life-bringing seeds of many things
for us, and – by contrast – it is necessary that there are many seeds
that fly about for death and disease. These, when they have arisen
by chance (*casu...forte*) and disturbed thoroughly the heavens, disease-filled air is made.

On the later fate of this "seed" explanation of disease, cf. Nutton 1983, who also treats the question of "cause," "responsibility," and "individual predisposition" in disease. (Cf. esp. 4-7, 9-11 [on the latter pages he discusses Lucretius].)

⁴³ One exemplary presentation of the symptoms of plague may be found at Lucretius *De rerum natura* 6.1145-62:

First their heads were burning with heat
and both eyes were red with fire welling up from below.
Then their jaws were sweating, black with blood,
and the path of the voice was closing, fenced in with sores,
and the tongue, translator of the mind, was dripping with blood,
weakened by disease, slow to move, rough to the touch.
From there, when – by the throat – the chest had filled and
when the disease-bearing power had flowed even into the sad hearts of the sick,
then truly all hold on life was slipping.
Breath was pushing a foul odor from the mouth,
like the scent of rancid, exposed corpses.
And the very powers of the whole mind, the
whole body already was drooping at the very doorstep of death.
For these insupportable ills, both distressing anxiety
and complaints mingled with groans were constant companions.
Thick retching through night and day,
constantly compelling muscles and limbs to tighten,
was destroying them with fatigue, already exhausted as they were.

voice and appearance in the face of death, is at least as Stoic as it is Epicurean, and perhaps the most dramatic feature of Atticus' death scene, his decision – made with great resolve – to starve himself rather than to continue enduring treatment and disease seems not wholly unlike Cato the Younger's refusal to submit to Caesar for pardon.⁴⁴ The decision, as the text puts it, “to leave off nourishing his disease” (*alere morbum desinere*) may perhaps be read as a revolt against the tyranny of disease, an attempt to step away from an undesired governance of his body. Whatever the case, though, this decision reads much like the rational, intentional choice that characterizes the death of Stoic heroes.

Yet – even as Atticus makes the choice to perish – his disease swerves into remission, a fact no doubt designed, within Nepos' narrative, to test the constancy of his resolve but one that also reminds us of the ways in which disease remains hidden and unknown, a manifestation whose principle (*ratio*) is chance (*casu*). His death thus remains a picture of constancy but perhaps also a picture of senseless obstinance, starvation in the face of a receding illness. I point to this fact because, in reading through these concluding paragraphs of the *Life of Atticus*, one is struck by the fact that Atticus' death, while perhaps more Epicurean than Stoic, dwells uncomfortably and incompletely within a traditional assessment of the doctrines of either philosophical school. Indeed, this final swerve of Atticus' illness calls into question Nepos' own reading of Atticus' death in so far as it does not allow the simple, easy conclusion that Atticus' choices and habits shape his final moments.

What I want to say of Atticus coincides rather uncannily with a no doubt unrelated statement of Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot, in *l'espace littéraire* (*The Space of Literature*), connects suicide with artistic production, noting that this connection arises because “...the artist is

⁴⁴ Seneca's *De constantia sapientis* forms perhaps the easiest *locus* for the discussion of “constancy” in Stoicism.

linked to his work in the same strange way in which the man who takes death for a goal is linked to death.”⁴⁵ In developing this connection, Blanchot writes:

Voluntary death is the refusal to see the other death, the death one cannot grasp, which one never reaches. It is a kind of sovereign negligence, an alliance made with visible death in order to exclude the invisible one, a pact with the good, faithful death which I use constantly in the world, an effort to expand its sphere, to make it still viable and true beyond itself, where it is no longer anything but the other death. The expression “I kill myself” suggests this doubling that is not taken into account. For “I” is a self in the plenitude of its action and resolution, capable of acting sovereignly upon itself, always strong enough to reach itself with its blow. And yet the one who is thus struck is no longer I, but another, so that when I kill myself, perhaps it is “I” who does the killing, but it is not done to me. Nor is it my death – the one I have dealt – that I have now to die, but rather the death which I refused, which I neglected, and which is this very negligence – perpetual flight and inertia.⁴⁶

Here he describes suicide as functioning, in a sense, like artistic production: the suicide, like the artist, engages an intentional act but does so falsely. An “I” acts in Blanchot’s analysis, but it does not act upon itself. It acts upon another that does not receive the death given but rather the death refused, neglected. And it is in this negligence, this neglected death, that “the work” – artistic creation – “wants to dwell.”

Not all of what Blanchot says translates easily to Atticus’ death; Blanchot illuminates artistic production through the figure of suicide and not the reverse. Yet some aspects of Blanchot’s statement resonate: the frustration of intentional action that characterizes his model, the “I” that attempts but fails to act upon itself, resembles the figure of Atticus who chooses to throw off the sovereignty of his disease, a disease that may have meanwhile decided to abdicate its position of authority. What Atticus chose to kill, “to leave off nourishing,” was his diseased body, though he may ultimately have killed something else. And what he leaves behind – though traditional Epicurean doctrine would perhaps suggest it

⁴⁵ Blanchot 1982: 105.

⁴⁶ Blanchot 1982: 106-7, translation lightly modified.

is nothing more than atoms – is a creative work of sorts, an *exemplum* mediated through the pen of Nepos, an *exemplum* neither fully Epicurean nor Stoic but entirely Roman. In the words of the famous Epicurean saying, death may indeed be nothing to us in so far as we are individual agents confronting a sensory experience, yet it – as Atticus shows – also may leave behind creative works, *exempla*, that, variously represented, may in fact be something for an “us” that thinks and reads, even if it cannot feel, beyond individual sensory experience.

Moreover, Blanchot’s analysis also gives us a figure for negotiating the primary concern of the present essay – Cornelius Nepos’ relation to his subject, Titus Pomponius Atticus, and more specifically, his relation to Atticus’ Epicureanism.⁴⁷ Nepos himself is not entirely unlike Blanchot’s suicide in so far as his work, his depiction of Atticus’ death, evades the analysis it explicitly provides. He repeatedly claims that, for Atticus, “his habits fashion his fate”; yet, in the end, it is difficult to see how this explanation holds. Atticus’ final moments are colored by a complex set of details, including both his intention “to leave off nourishing his disease” (and ultimately to starve himself) and the rapid appearance and disappearance of his disease. Depending upon which details we choose to emphasize, depending, that is, on which story of nature we choose to tell, Atticus’ death both permits and denies Stoic and Epicurean accounts.

Given the Epicurean traces found elsewhere in *Atticus*, it is tempting to emphasize any Epicurean resonances, above all the presence of Atticus’ disease and its unpredictable nature. But such an emphasis risks ignoring Atticus’ final constancy and resolve. And it is perhaps here that Blanchot helps most: he speaks of dying “the death which I neglected”; and we may similarly think of Nepos penning an *exemplum* that is intended but that hardly provides the intended textual performance, hardly produces the intended effect on its

⁴⁷ Implicitly, then, Blanchot’s figure of suicide as a model for artistic production turns Atticus and Nepos into doubles.

audience. J. Hillis Miller has written that "...an example, it may be,... legislates or constitutes, but what it does is to disrupt the cognitive clarity of the argument it was meant to clarify."⁴⁸ Such a description may well apply to the *exemplum* of Atticus' death, which – despite its inconsistently Stoic and Epicurean performance – is perhaps most Epicurean in its ability to disrupt the clear, teleological structure that would grant Nepos' narrative (and Atticus' death) a singular meaning. Epicurean ghosts, as we have seen, can always be disruptive creatures but perhaps never more so than when they haunt the resolve of seemingly Stoic agents.

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⁴⁸ Miller 1995: 163-64. On Roman exemplarity more generally, cf. Roller 2004. (Roller is at work on a larger monograph on exemplarity.)

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