

II

Tu ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi finem di diderint. (...) Dum loquimur, fugerit invida aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

-Horace

My heart, my heart, agitated by irremediable sorrows, stand against your enemies and the adversities of fate. When defeated, do not hide and despair; when you win, do not exult too loudly; rejoice over your victories and grieve over your misfortunes, not too much. Learn the rhythm that rules men's heart.

-Archiloco,

The biggest obstacle to living is the expectation, which depends on tomorrow, and loses today.

-Seneca

I have seen my death in my dreams and it helped me appreciate life more. I have also seen my life in my dreams, and it helped me appreciate death more.

-Brian Warner

And yet, are we really capable of defining what harmony really is? How often, in our life, have we felt complete, fulfilled, balanced? How many times did we occur to taste pure happiness –not just a temporary absence of pain, not just a game of circumstances disposed on the chess board of our mind in order to leave no escape to our human tendency to create chaos from order once we have done it reverse; not just a warm rush of endorphins to our brain, given by relief or satisfaction or the gratification of our senses; not just the enthusiasm of serendipity. Not just a handful of seconds in which dopamine or surpasses anything else. The point is, we are not stable creatures: the iron in our blood was formed in stars billions of years ago and just like the galaxy that generated us, to whom we are not more than dust swinging in an insignificant wind of casualties, we tend to mutation and our survival is given by an endless alternate of incompatible opposites. As Heraclito had already stated, life is but a bow with different extremes at its ends and a clue joining them. There cannot be life when there is no contrast and concord is a mere, occasional pause between a contrast and another; not even our pulse ever stops going up and down and when it does it is because our heart has stopped. And if it is always steady, then it means it never races. Who wants to live without his cardiac muscle ever getting a bit troubled? Peace can be damaging, when it is too steady. Socrates proved that when we write our thoughts down we are partially killing the reasoning; but for contrast, we could not be alive, nor achieve anything new. ‘If what you say does not offend anyone, you are not saying anything’ - and what Oscar Wilde probably could have meant is ‘Memento audere semper’. What is harmony? The quote almost seems to call for references to classical literature. Mimnermus wrote about the briefness and fragility of life; Archiloco was the first one to introduce the concept of *me den agan* with the use of the locution ‘*me lien*’: not too much. But we can see it as only the very first step in a course of thousands of year which involves both the greek and latin philosophical literature and, over all, aimed to make philosophy a tool of incommensurable power, as it grew, like for Epicure, into a way of thinking that could psychologically free the human mind from pain. The *quadripharmakon* is an eminent sample of this possibility and it is disarmingly logical. Why should we

# Essay 52

fear death? It is the last thing we will see anyway; we will not even notice when we are dead. Why should we worry about gods? They do not directly interact with us. Why should we care about pain? If it's intense, it will be gone shortly and if it lasts then it is bearable. And just like our body is capable of surviving an impressive number of mutilations, staying alive despite being put through the toughest conditions just because of its survival instinct, so can our mind. We are amazingly resistant and the mental constructs we come up with when we refuse to surrender to pain can seem unbelievable. It is astonishing to think how strong a mind can be; how many difficulties and sufferance it is able to overcome, and how much it is willing to compromise when it feels menaced.

^For the infortunes that have no remedy, the gods provided us with the strong tlemosunh. ^

And it is charming to take notice of the fact that the root of the word which means endurance comes from the name of the mythological giant Atlantis, the one to bear the whole world on his nape or, to be precise, on the homonymous vertebra. To endure is to be strong enough to stand what we are forced to face; but the tlemosunh has to be interpreted as an active proof of power of will and not as the passive surrendering to something that is bigger than us. There are, of course, forces and odds that we have no power on. But since ^The mind is a place in itself, and for itself, it can make a hell out of heaven, a heaven out of hell^ and this means that our balance, since this is the closest we get to harmony, only depends on us. As the example brought by Seneca of an old wise man who was deprived by a powerful emperor of his properties, his homeland, and his family; when the emperor, to humiliate him, asked him what he had left, the old man answered ^^ Omnia mea mecum sunt^^. Our mind belongs to us, and so does our time and our inner self. Everything else can be taken away from us at any moment. If we keep that in mind, or, like Tucidide stated, accept the fact that we can do nothing against the Tuke, then we will live more peacefully. To be wise is, through the pathei mathos (meaning the learning by means of suffering) to get to know ourselves (talete's gnothe seaton) and this means acknowledging our own capabilities and limits, and becoming what we are. This is also a key to peace with ourselves, since the main reason of depression is knowing that we are not what we should. To be wise, according to Seneca, is to live ^protinus^. If we consider what Horace, who believed in the aurea mediocritas (golden way in the middle) had previously stated, we should take notice of the evolution of the philosophical thought from one author to another. Horace is the father of the masterpiece which is ^carpe diem^, usually translated as ^seize the day^. It is useful to analyze the full piece.

^You do not ask, we may not know, Leuconoe, what end the Gods decreed you and I shall have, and don't you attempt at discerning it using Babylon horoscopes. How much better it is to bear whatever will be! Whether this is just one of the long series of winters that awaits us, or this is the last one we are given to see. Do not ask, and wisely pour the wine. While we speak, the hateful time has already fled away. Carpe diem, and rely as less as you can on the future. ^

Scire nefas: we are not consented to know what tomorrow will bring, and yet they both insist on the importance of spending wisely the time we have in this life, Seneca and Horace take in great account the presence of death. Of course it is, along with the versatility of fate, superhuman and ineffable, but fear and hope are the eternal rulers of our actions, and the fear of how tempus fugit is what keeps us from wasting our time –or at least it should. If disrupting our harmony means significantly mutate our life when it is pointing in a direction that we dislike and can possibly change, then it is our right to. If disrupting our harmony means getting back in the aurea mediocritas once we get

# Essay 52

dangerously close to extremes that threaten our inner stability, then it is fair to. What do we mean by harmony? I mean tlemosunh and the ability to stand against all odds. The patience to accept what we cannot change and the strength to change what we can, even if we need chaos to do so, and if harmony is generated by the disruption of preexistent harmonies, then we should embrace that.

The disruption of harmony is a transformation of events, a proceeding of fate.

Protinus vive: Horace suggests we should seize the day, choosing the most beautiful Kairos among many others: picking the one moment to act out our virtue and make happen the best we can aim to. According to Horace, we need to live fully our youth, to make the most out of the golden time of our life, our best age. Yet the more recent argumentations of Seneca seem to be even more accurate, since ´protinus vive´ implies the effort to live every day, every hour, every very second. Seneca discourages the procrastination of pleasure, for scire nefas, we may not know what is going to happen. A man who spends all his life working in the hope to enjoy the years he has left once he retires is not considering the possibility of dying shortly before that. We do not know when we will die. Who knows if it would be better to know that. Maybe it would help us living more protinus? All human beings just struggle to figure out what really matters while they are alive, and sometimes we are so busy working to have a good future that we die before having had the time to really live. We are all secretly convinced we are immortal; we all deep inside believe we are our own god; we all really think we are the only real person in the world and are so scared of losing what we think we possess by right. We are so afraid we are going to lose what we do not have that to avoid this we waste the only things that we really own: ourselves; and our time. We are all just looking for a quid, something to give sense to our whole existence, something that can characterize us and crucify to a wall of certainty what we cannot understand. But eventually, in the process of living and growing up, the loss of harmony given by the fall of illusions and of the structure we constantly try to build destabilize us and we live this is a wrong way: by refusing the pathei mathos, we try to renege our own nature and try to tend to the bright extremes, forgetting that we need pain, death, failure, poverty and disgrace to know what pleasure, life, success, wealth and honor mean.

Me den agan. We shall not crumble down because of sorrow. We shall not fly too high when luck is in our favor, since the inner balance is what keeps us sane: we must remember that everything always changes, and the only stability we can find is in our mind. We can lose everything and yet maintain a steady pace inside our head. Everything happens inside our head. How many times has philosophers question about the true nature of what surrounds us? What if all this is but a dream inside a dream, to quote Poe, what if we are just a galaxy imagining all this, what if we are in a coma and our brain is making up lucid dreams we will forget once we wake up or die, what if we are a dream of a galaxy, what if nothing is real? Should it mean everything is legit? Love happens inside our head, and so does pain. To be real, it is just chemical: substances in our head being secreted and mixed up because of outer gauds and sending signals in our whole body. ´of course it is all in your head, harry, but why in the hell should it mean it is not real?´ The soul really can be a prison of the body. Is not it frustrating to accept that we are just a piece of meat in a cranium that drives around a body ?

But even once we accept it we cannot really get far from our concrete, human nature. We will still eat our nails if it makes us feel better. We will still smoke or do drugs even if it is bad for us , even if rationally it makes no sense. We will still argue to no end with someone who is right if we do not like that person because we want to defend our personality over theirs even more than our reasoning

## Essay 52

over theirs. We are only as rational as our instinct sedated by the fulfilling of its needs consent us to be. We will still feed on another human's corpse if the alternative is starving. We are only as rational as it's necessary. So how fragile is our harmony? It is firstly based on our physical demands. Then comes the rest. Love, fear, hope, sorrow, ambition and so on. All it takes to mess our harmony up in the first place is being hungry or having not taken enough rest. And it is to no avail to deny that most of the greatest minds were pushed to creativeness by their primary needs, to produce because they needed money to eat, so what rules what? Our mind or our body? Is it even correct to consider them as separate entities? Maybe it would be, in this case, less inappropriate to just draw a line between what is inside of us and what is outside for, as already said, we can survive almost anything if we really want to. And it strengthens us to be forced to. If we take pain for granted, refusing to allow ourselves to feel it as it is normal, maybe we are just building up a psychological shell inside which we are defenseless, because trying to avoid our nature, being us limited, sensitive, fragile creatures, is utopic and leads to a much worse mental breakdown as we feel unmasked by our true self. The aim of psychoanalysis is, in fact, to explore the way a mind work and help it out its prisons in order to achieve a new balance –and has all to do with the gnóthi seáton we have quoted earlier. So the relief of mind is given by a pure form of sincerity from itself to itself, and accepting the evidence of having nothing to be completely sure, completely confident about, can as well be interpreted as a new form of confidence. This, and the pursue of fair pleasure, where by fair is intended a concept reasoned through a study of various social and psychological conventions –some fairness we can be sort of sure and confident about- can get us really close to an harmony based on ourselves that takes in consideration how important it is to live without regrets, by seizing every second of a life that is long enough if well spent, and humanly: fearing death, feeling joy, feeling pain, falling in love. Me den agan.

Alas! Alas! Time eats away our life, and the obscure enemy that gnaws our heart and draws strength from the blood we lose.

-Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs Du Mal