

## OF THE TRANQUILLITY OF THE MIND.

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PLUTARCH WISHETH ALL HEALTH TO HIS PACCIVS.

1. It was late before I received your letter, wherein you make it your request that I would write something to you concerning the tranquillity of the mind, and of those things in the *Timaeus* which require a more perspicuous interpretation. At the same time a very urgent occasion called upon our common friend and companion Eros to sail directly to Rome; that which quickened him to a greater expedition was a dispatch he received from Fundanus, that best of men, who, as his custom is, always enjoins the making haste. Therefore, wanting full leisure to consummate those things justly which you requested, and being on the other side unwilling to send one from me to your dear self empty handed, I have transcribed my commonplace book, and hastily put together those collections which I had by me concerning this subject; for I thought you a man that did not look after flourishes of style and the affected elegance of language, but only required what was instructive in its nature and useful to us in the conduct of our lives. And I congratulate that bravery of temper in you, that though you are admitted into the confidence of princes, and have obtained so great a vogue of eloquence at the bar that no man hath exceeded you, you have not, like the tragic *Merops*, suffered yourself to be puffed up with the applause of the multitude, and transported beyond those bounds which are prescribed to

our passions ; but you call to mind that which you have so often heard, that a rich slipper will not cure the gout, a diamond ring a whitlow, nor will an imperial diadem ease the headache. For what advantage is there in honor, riches, or an interest at court, to remove all perturbations of mind and procure an equal tenor of life, if we do not use them with decency when they are present to our enjoyment, and if we are continually afflicted by their loss when we are deprived of them ? And what is this but the province of reason, when the sensual part of us grows turbulent and makes excursions, to check its sallies and bring it again within the limits it hath transgressed, that it may not be carried away and so perverted with the gay appearances of things. For as Xenophon gives advice, we ought to remember the Gods and pay them particular devotions when our affairs are prosperous, that so when an exigency presseth us we may more confidently invoke them, now we have conciliated their favor and made them our friends. So wise men always ruminate upon those arguments which have any efficacy against the troubles of the mind before their calamities happen, that so the remedies being long prepared, they may acquire energy, and work with a more powerful operation. For as angry dogs are exasperated by every one's rating them, and are flattered to be quiet only by his voice to which they are accustomed ; so it is not easy to pacify the brutish affections of the soul but by familiar reasons, and such as are used to be administered in such inward distempers.

2. Besides, he that affirmed that whosoever would enjoy tranquillity of mind must disengage himself from all private and public concerns, would make us pay dear for our tranquillity by buying it with idleness ; as if he should prescribe thus to a sick man : —

Lie still, poor wretch, and keep thy bed.\*

\* Eurip. Orestes, 258.

Now stupefaction is a bad remedy for desperate pain in the body, and verily he would be no better physician for the soul who should order idleness, softness, and neglect of friends, kinsfolk, and country, in order to remove its trouble and grief. It is likewise a false position that those live most contentedly who have the least to do; for then by this rule women should be of more sedate dispositions than men, since they only sit at home and mind their domestic affairs. Whereas in fact, as Hesiod expresseth it, —

The virgins' tender limbs are kept from cold;  
Not the least wind to touch them is so bold;\*

but nevertheless we see that grief and troubles and discontentments, arising from jealousy or superstition or vain opinions, flow as it were with a torrent into the apartments of the females. And though Laertes lived twenty years in the fields secluded from the world, and

Only a toothless hag did make his bed,  
Draw him his drink, and did his table spread,†

though he forsook his house and country, and fled from a kingdom, yet grief with his sloth and sadness still kept him company. There are some to whom idleness hath been an affliction; as for instance, —

But raging still, amidst his navy sat  
The stern Achilles, steadfast in his hate;  
Nor mix'd in combat, nor in council join'd;  
But wasting cares lay heavy on his mind:  
In his black thoughts revenge and slaughter roll,  
And scenes of blood rise dreadful in his soul.‡

And he himself complains of it, being mightily disturbed, after this manner: —

I live an idle burden to the ground.¶

Hence it is that Epicurus adviseth those who aspire to glory not to stagnate in their ambition, but be in perpetual

\* Hesiod, Works and Days, 519.

† Il. I. 488.

‡ Odys. I. 191.

¶ Il. XVIII. 104.

motion, and so obey the dictates of their genius in managing the commonwealth; because they would be more tormented and would suffer greater damages by idleness, if they were disappointed of that they were in the eager pursuit of. But the philosopher is absurd in this, that he doth not excite men who have abilities to qualify themselves for charges in the government, but only those who are of a restless and unquiet disposition. For the tranquillity and perturbation of the mind are not to be measured by the fewness or multitude of our actions, but by their beauty or turpitude; since the omission of what is good is no less troublesome than the commission of evil.

3. As for those who think there is one positive state of life, which is always serene, — some fancying it to be of the husbandmen, others of those which are unmarried, and some of kings, — Menander clearly shows them their error in these verses: —

I thought those men, my Phania, always best,  
 Who take no money up at interest;  
 Who disengaged from business spend the day,  
 And in complaints don't sigh the night away,  
 Who, troubled, lamentable groans don't fetch,  
 Thus breathing out, Ah! miserable wretch!  
 Those whom despairing thoughts don't waking keep,  
 But without startings sweetly take their sleep.

He goes on and observes to us, that the same lot of misfortune falls to the rich as well as the poor: —

These neighbors slender confines do divide, —  
 Sorrow and human life are still allied.  
 It the luxurious liver doth infest,  
 And robs the man of honor of his rest;  
 In stricter ties doth with the poor engage,  
 With him grows old to a decrepit age.

But as timorous and raw sailors in a boat, when they grow sick with the working of the waves, think they shall overcome their pukings if they go on board of a ship, but there being equally out of order, go into a galley, but are therefore never the better, because they carry their nauseousness

and fear along with them ; so the several changes of life do only shift and not wholly extirpate the causes of our trouble. And these are only our want of experience, the weakness of our judgment, and a certain impotence of mind which hinders us from making a right use of what we enjoy. The rich man is subject to this uneasiness of humor as well as the poor ; the bachelor as well as the man in wedlock. This makes the pleader withdraw from the bar, and then his retirement is altogether as irksome. And this infuseth a desire into others to be presented at court ; and when they come there, they presently grow weary of the life.

Poor men when sick do peevishly complain,  
The sense of want doth aggravate their pain.\*

For then the wife grows officious in her attendance, the physician himself is a disease, and the bed is not made easy enough to his mind ; even his friend importunes him with his visits : —

He doth molest him when he first doth come,  
And when he goes away he's troublesome,

as Ion expresseth it. But when the heat of the disease is over and the former temperature of the body is restored, then health returns, and brings with it all those pleasant images which sickness chased away ; so that he that yesterday refused eggs and delicate cakes and the finest manchets will now snap eagerly at a piece of household bread, with an olive and a few water-cresses.

4. So reason makes all sorts of life easy, and every change pleasant. Alexander wept when he heard from Anaxarchus that there was an infinite number of worlds, and his friends asking him if any accident had befallen him, he returns this answer : Do not you think it a matter worthy of lamentation, that, when there is such a vast multitude of them, we have not yet conquered one ? But Crates with only his

\* Eurip. Orestes, 232.

scrip and tattered cloak laughed out his life jocosely, as if he had been always at a festival. The great power and command of Agamemnon gave him an equal disturbance : —

Look upon Agamemnon, Atreus's son,  
 What mighty loads of trouble he hath on.  
 He is distracted with perpetual care ;  
 Jove that inflicts it gives him strength to bear.\*

Diogenes, when he was exposed to sale in the market and was commanded to stand up, not only refused to do it, but ridiculed the auctioneer, with this piece of raillery . What ! if you were selling a fish, would you bid it rise up ? Socrates was a philosopher in the prison, and discoursed with his friends, though he was fettered. But Phaeton, when he climbed up into heaven, thought himself unhappy there, because nobody would give him his father's chariot and the horses of the sun. As therefore the shoe is twisted to the shape of the foot and not in the opposite way, so do the affections of the mind render the life conformable to themselves. For it is not custom, as one observed, which makes even the best life pleasant to those who choose it, but it must be prudence in conjunction with it, which makes it not only the best for its kind, but sweetest in its enjoyment. The fountain therefore of tranquillity being in ourselves, let us cleanse it from all impurity and make its streams limpid, that all external accidents, by being made familiar, may be no longer grievous to us, since we shall know how to use them well.

Let not these things thy least concern engage ;  
 For though thou fret, they will not mind thy rage.  
 Him only good and happy we may call  
 Who rightly useth what doth him befall.†

5. For Plato compared our life to a game at dice, where we ought to throw for what is most commodious for us, but when we have thrown, to make the best of our casts.

\* II. X. 88.

† From Eurip. Bellerophon.

We cannot make what chances we please turn up, if we play fair; this lies out of our power. That which is within our power, and is our duty if we are wise, is to accept patiently what Fortune shall allot us, and so to adjust things in their proper places, that what is our own may be disposed of to the best advantage, and what hath happened against our will may offend us as little as possible. But as to men who live without measures and with no prudence, like those whose constitution is so sickly and infirm that they are equally impatient both of heats and colds, prosperity exalts them above their temper, and adversity dejects them beneath it; indeed each fortune disturbs them, or rather they raise up storms to themselves in either, and they are especially querulous under good circumstances. Theodorus, who was called the Atheist, was used to say, that he reached out his instructions with the right hand, and his auditors received them with their left hands. So men of no education, when Fortune would even be complaisant to them, are yet so awkward in their observance, that they take her addresses on the wrong side. On the contrary, men that are wise, as the bees draw honey from the thyme, which is a most unsavory and dry herb, extract something that is convenient and useful even from the most bitter afflictions.

6. This therefore let us learn and have inculcated upon us; like the man who threw a stone at a bitch, but hit his step-mother, on which he exclaimed, Not so bad. So we may often turn the direction of what Fortune obtrudes upon us contrary to our desires. Diogenes was driven into banishment, but it was "not so bad" for him; for of an exile he became a philosopher. Zeno of Citium, when he heard that the only ship he had left was sunk by an unmerciful tempest, with all the rich cargo that was in her, brake out into this exclamation: Fortune, I applaud thy contrivance, who by this means hast reduced me to a threadbare cloak

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