

## **Stoic Quantifying**

“Your poisonous malignity will not hinder me from my highest ambitions. The poison you spit at others, which kills you anyway, won't hinder me to follow, not the life I conduct, but the life I well know I should conduct, and follow virtue even from afar”

On a bus from the Venice airport to the mountains where I am now restoring an abandoned barn to deposit my life-work, I was reading Seneca. I was reading it for different reasons; in the first place, it was what an old professor of mine quoted when he decided to give up his inspiring career and retire to a small barn near the town the bus was passing. Secondly, reading Seneca was like a counter-reaction to all the Anglo-Saxon stuff one is forced to refer to in today's humanities. Thirdly, Seneca has often been quite superficially pointed out as one of the first persons to quantify himself.

Although not entirely Italian (I am from a small community in the Alps), I was reading an Italian version of different writings by Seneca and standing on the bus, avoiding the pleasure of sitting, I came across the passage I quote at the beginning of this essay. I promptly memorized the English translation that I improvised on the spot. It occurred to me that this quote should also be memorized by others who dedicate their lives to devising disciplines to strengthen themselves, such as by efforfully quantifying their lives.

The passage was used by Seneca to counter all the accusations that his enemies “spit” at him. Most of these accusations were related to Seneca being rich, like other stoics. Seneca saw no problem in being rich as it allowed him to apply his virtue more extensively, but he despised luxury, in other words he had properties but the properties didn't have him.

The Marxists of today are indignant about a similar issue, how quantified self, life-logging and sousveillance are being used to generate money, and so forth. I think this accusation also spills over on the people undertaking these practices. Certainly, if one is to go hardcore and set up his or her own rules to deal with his or her self and the overflow around him or herself, the notion becomes radically different.

A Michel Foucault about to die of HIV, wrote "Technology of the Self" to refer to another tremendously rich stoic, the Roman emperor Marco Aurelio. If Foucault on the one hand created the phobia on power and surveillance, he departed with this small essay, bringing in the new notion of taking care of the self. What I try to suggest here is that we should move beyond the black and white areas we have created when we think about self-discipline.

It seems to me that any form of control and discipline is conceived, through the lenses of Marxism, as a form of Fascism. And yet it is right in the stoic philosophy that we can read very enlightening passages which show how, developing a discipline in one self, we can live in a world, accepting its transformations while keeping a form of autonomy.

I like to recite here by heart Aurelio: “be part of the plant but don't think like the plant”. In this light, I would like to further differentiate between the new trend of people quantifying and logging themselves. As I said before, those who run a few apps and use a little app as an oracle to reveal their mood and eventually provide marketing information to a third party, are thinking like the plant.

Consumers as well as artists keeping up with the trends get closer to what an Epicurean would be, basing their lives on pleasures. However, the hardcore fellows who are in the process of unveiling their lives, constantly engaging with the reality around them, are what I would call the new stoics.

Nowadays there seems to be only one form of intellectual, the academic. Seneca however divides philosophers or better people as seeking wisdom in three kinds of ways: the Epicurean avoids action and seeks pleasure, the Academic seeks contemplation and the Stoic seeks operosity. I use the word operosity or laboriousness here to avoid the term action. The latter goes against Stoic principles. Rage driven movements like Fascism and today's protest movements go against the tempered spirit of a Stoic. Rage is considered the worst of vices.

Operosity is at the base of Stoicism then and therefore those who devise a technology of the self to deal with our accelerated times, are in my opinion, even if ridiculed, continuing this ancient intellectual tradition. As perhaps applying operosity in the republic at large becomes impossible for them, given corruption and impenetrability, Seneca suggests to look for other, smaller republics. Connecting to Foucault now, I like to think of the self as this republic, something to take care of and apply operosity to.

Adhering to a discipline for ourselves, in my thirteen years of experience, ever since I started photographing every object my right hand has used, I've come to realize that the republic I have been taking care of to much, is slowly expanding back into the real world, providing me with what Aurelio would define as the directive principle of my life.

Now the bus is finally approaching the mountains. Emperor Marco Aurelio would scorn the need for a natural retreat; he would only need to retreat into himself to find peace of mind and yet I can see the small fields awaiting my care, I can see the young fruit trees I planted, the old people waiting to chat and the barn I renovated with all the data I sampled over time.

I can see a prospect of love and tranquility for a work I can share with locals and thoughts I can share with others in my future journeys. Following Aurelio's meditations in fact, I will not prevent myself to be part of the complexity of life, cutting the branches of the plant I happen to belong to. I ought to continue dealing with my nature as well as with the overflow around me and quantifying is the virtue that keeps me going and directs me.

The bus is getting closer to my village. I can see it through the pollution of the over industrialized northern Italian cities now struggling with the new economy, I can see it through the cement and the too big, worldly and therefore bad social managing of the last half century. As much as a Chinese park with its elders practicing their arts, I see the village who first resisted the rage of war and then of industrialization as the place where I want my virtue to be and new life to be born again.