

The Paradox of Genius and Madness: Seneca and his influence

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*Nemo igitur vir magnus sine aliquo adflatu
divino umquam fuit*

Cicero¹

RESUMEN

Paradójicamente, Séneca concluye su tratado *De Tranquillitate Animi* con una cita de Aristóteles: *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit* (no ha habido ningún genio sin una veta de locura) e introduce así un elemento en conflicto con el pensar estoico. Los autores de este artículo dan prueba de la popularidad de este aforismo rastreando su presencia en los autores ingleses, mayormente del siglo XVII y XVIII y también en Petrarca, Montaigne y Kierkegaard y concluyen que Séneca, al partir de la rigurosa convención del tratado, revela un nuevo realismo psicológico no desprovisto de ingenio y espíritu lúdico.

SUMMARY

Paradoxically, Seneca finishes his treatise *De Tranquillitate Animi* with a quotation from Aristotle: *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit* (no great genius has existed without a strain of madness), thus introducing an element in conflict with Stoic thought. The authors of this paper prove the popularity of this dictum by tracing its presence in various English authors, mainly from the XVII and XVIII century, and also in Petrarch, Montaigne and Kierkegaard and conclude that Seneca, departing from the rigorous conventions of the treatise, reveals a new psychological realism as well as a good deal of playfulness and wit.

In *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle at one point writes:

For in fine, as Poet Dryden says,

¹ *De Natura Deorum* 2.66.167.

you do walk hand in hand with sheer
 madness, all the way, - who is by
 no means pleasant company!...
 The higher the Wisdom, the closer
 was its neighbourhood and kindred
 with mere Insanity...²

As concerns this reference to Dryden, the editor of the Oxford edition, A. M. D. Hughes, concedes in a footnote: «I have been unable to find this»³. The failure to track down Carlyle's source is surprising, for his allusion refers to one of John Dryden's most memorable satiric couplets. In his «Absalom and Achitophel», Part I (1681), the following satiric lines allude to and castigate the talented Achitophel (the Earl of Shaftesbury):

Great Wits are sure to Madness near ally'd;
 And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide...⁴

The teasing and tantalizing suggestion that greatness somehow borders upon its opposite, insanity, is a bold paradox, and has an interesting literary history. Most directly, it may be traced back to Seneca's *De Tranquillitate Animi* (c. 60-62 A.D.). In the closing pages of his treatise celebrating tranquillity and peace of mind, Seneca shocks his interlocutor (ironically named Serenus) by proposing that drunkenness may at times serve as an appropriate relaxation. Seneca quotes Plato on the irrationality of poetic inspiration⁵, and then cites Aristotle as saying:

«Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit»⁶.
 (No great genius has existed without a strain of madness.)

² *Past and Present*, ed. A. M. D. HUGHES, Oxford 1918, 185-86.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁴ «Absalom and Achitophel», lines 163-64, in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. *et al.*, Berkeley 1972, II, 10. Consult Ruth Wallerstein, «To Madness Near Allied: Shaftesbury and His Place in the Design and Thought of *Absalom and Achitophel*», *HLQ* 6, 1943, 445-71, which studies Platonic-Aristotelian ideas of madness in terms of the Renaissance's concern with reason, melancholy, and religious enthusiasm.

⁵ *Phaedrus* 245A. *Phaedrus* 243E-245C develops the idea of poetic inspiration as a divine «possession», claiming that a heaven-sent delirium surpasses mere earthly sanity. But we must remember that Plato does not normally treat such sublime lunacy as a benefit or a virtue; in *Ion* 534B, *Apology* 22B-C, and *Meno* 98B ff. it is not a good. Indeed, such poetic frenzy is one major reason poets are excluded from the *Republic* (607A).

⁶ *De Tranquillitate Animi* 17.10, in L. Annaei Senecae, *Dialogorum Libri Duodecim*, ed. L. D. REYNOLDS, Oxford 1977, 238.

In fact, Aristotle had not asserted so much. In his *Problemata*, he had formulated a query based on medical observation:

Διὰ τί πάντες ὅσοι περιττοὶ γεγόνασιν ἄνδρες
ἢ κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἢ πολιτικὴν ἢ ποίησιν ἢ τέχνας
φαίνονται μελαγχολικοὶ ὄντες, καὶ οἱ μὲν οὕτως
ὥστε καὶ λαμβάνεσθαι τοῖς ἀπὸ μελαίνης χολῆς
ἀρρωσθήμασιν...?⁷

(Why is it that all men who have become above average either in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts seem to be melancholy, and some to such an extent that they are even seized by the diseases [arising] from black bile...?)

Aristotle is speaking of the «humours» here, of persons with temperaments resulting from an excess of black bile, noting that only in extreme cases does such a disposition manifest itself in frenzy. As exempla, Aristotle mentions, among others, Heracles, Ajax, Lysander, Empedocles, Plato, and Socrates. Other authors, notably Plutarch and Cicero, refer to this Aristotelian observation⁸, but it is boldly reformulated by Seneca. Whereas Aristotle is dealing with various phases of melancholy, Seneca emphasizes madness. For Seneca no doubt wanted to employ it in a more extreme fashion to shock Serenus at the disturbing conclusion of the *De Tranquillitate Animi*. There, Seneca moves from advocating near-drunkenness as relaxation, to accepting the madness of poetic inspiration and frenzy, only to conclude by presenting Aristotle as affirming that, in fact, all great intellects are demented. We have travelled from tranquillity to occasional bouts of drinking, to poetic ecstasy, to generalized lunacy. Clearly, Seneca intends to startle Serenus by reshaping Aristotle's original observation. And he does so with his usual curt, aphoristic brilliance.

⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Problemata* 30.1. Hippocratic (and later Galenic) medicine had interpreted melancholia as a dangerous, lethargic, and morbid disease, and one afflicting the common man. On the other hand, Plato and Aristotle had become interested in the nature of genius. Plato attributes poetic achievement to frenzy or ecstasy, whereas Aristotle traces it to a physical cause: the proper apportionment of black bile. For a full text, translation, and careful analysis of *Problemata* 30.1 and its significance, consult Raymond Klubansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, New York 1964, 15-41. For the Elizabethan's fascination with melancholy, see Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady*, East Lansing, Mich. 1951.

⁸ See CICERO, *Tusc. Disput.* 1.33.80; *De Divin.* 1.38.81; Plutarch, *Lysander* 2.3. Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 18.7.4. There is still some question about Aristotle's authorship of a number of other sections of the *Problemata*.

Doubtless because of Seneca's extensive influence, as well as the proverbial, paradoxical nature of his assertion, the saying was broadly repeated in the Renaissance and after⁹. Needless to say, many a humanist knew Latin well, but was less sure of his Greek. For all such reasons, in the Renaissance the Senecan version is the one we encounter most frequently. And, to be sure, Seneca's rendition is the more inclusive. Plato paradoxically claimed that artists when inspired were literally out of their wits. But Seneca includes, not merely artists, but *all* men of genius and talent. Such a Senecan *dictum* in fact overturns the standard Stoic paradox that All but the Wise are Mad¹⁰. Hence the Senecan version is surely a more potent and shocking asseveration. Perhaps that, too, explains its broad circulation and popularity.

John Dryden found it fetching enough to have employed it a second time in one of his plays:

«I have heard, Madam, your greatest wits have ever a touch of madness and extravagance in them...»¹¹.

And Eustace Budgell, in the *Spectator* papers, misquotes Dryden's renowned lines from «Absalom and Achitophel» about great wits being to madness near allied, referring to them as a «Latin Proverb.»¹². The saying had indeed over the years acquired just such widespread station and repute.

The idea certainly did become axiomatic. Early in the Renaissance, Petrarch, writing an Epistle to Zoilus, states:

... magnum hic subsistere nullum
Censuit ingenium, nisi sit dementia mixta¹³,

(... he thought that no great genius
existed, unless mingled with madness),

directly echoing Seneca's conception. Elsewhere Petrarch, citing Aristotle, uses

⁹ Unfortunately, in the nineteenth century, spokesmen in medicine and psychology came to accept the paradox as being literally true, and many considered genius virtually synonymous with insanity; see, for instance, CESARE LOMBROSO, *The Man of Genius*, London 1891.

¹⁰ Cicero's, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* IV.

¹¹ «Sir Martin Mar-all» (1667), Act V, scene 1, Rose speaking; in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. H. T. SWEDENBERG, Jr. *et al.*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1966, IX, 269.

¹² *Spectator* 77, May 29, 1711.

¹³ FRANCISCI PETRARCHAE, «Epistolarum» II, Zoilo (c. 1349-1351), in *Operum*, 3 vols. Basileae 1554, III, 1351.

Seneca's exact phrasing: «*nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae [sic]*»¹⁴.

Ben Jonson, in his *Discoveries* (1641), speaks directly about the inspiration of an author's poetical rapture, quoting the precise passage in Plato that Seneca had used, adding:

... And of Aristotle; *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixturâ dementiae fuit. Nec potest grande aliquid, & supra caeteros loqui, nisi mota mens.* Then it riseth higher, as by a divine Instinct, when it contemnes common, and known conceptions. It utter somewhat above a mortall mouth. Then it gets aloft, and flies away with its Ryder, whether, before, it was doubtfull to ascend¹⁵.

As a matter of fact, Ben Jonson here has quoted and paraphrased the concluding lines of Seneca's *De Tranquillitate Animi*.

... siue Aristoteli «nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit»: non potest grande aliquid et super ceteros loqui nisi mota mens. Cum uulgaria et solita contempsit instinctuque sacro surrexit excelsior, tunc demum aliquid cecinit grandius ore mortali. Non potest sublime quicquam et in arduo positum contingere quam diu apud se est: desciscat oportet a solito et efferatur et mordeat frenos et rectorem rapiat suum eoque ferat quo per se timuisset escendere.

(*De Tranq. An.* 17.10-11)

(... or whether we should believe Aristotle [who says], «no great genius has existed without a strain of madness»: it is impossible to utter anything grand and preeminent unless the mind is aroused. When the mind scorns the vulgar and the ordinary and, by divine inspiration, rises higher, then at last it sings a melody that transcends the human voice. It cannot attain the exalted and the sublime on its own. It must revolt from the customary, must be carried away, champing at the bit, sweeping its rider along, and mounting to a height it would have feared to approach on its own.)

Robert Burton too notes in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

¹⁴ «De Secreto Conflictu curarum mearum» III (1342-1343) in *Opere di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. Emilio Bigi. 4th ed., Milano 1968, 649.

¹⁵ «Timber, or Discoveries», in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Oxford 1947, VIII, 637.

You shall find that of Aristotle true:
There is no great genius without a touch of madness¹⁶.

Similarly, Richard Fleckno (1665), in his «CHARACTER. Of a huge overvaluer of himself» uses the Senecan phrase to devalue an egotistical man. The Latin lines are so commonplace, that he feels it necessary only to refer to them in abbreviated form:

Nullum magnum ingenium, & c... That there's no great wit without some mixture of folly, & c...¹⁷.

And, still in a serious vein, all of Seneca's Latin saying is quoted by Sir Richard Blackmore, in his *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours*¹⁸. In 1843, Kierkegaard refers sombrely to «the old saying»:

Nullum unquam exstitit magnum ingenium sine aliqua dementia...,

as if reciting Seneca from memory¹⁹; Kierkegaard also employs the saying again in his journals²⁰. Moreover, in our own less learned and classical-minded era, there is still an occasional reference to the old adage. For example, novelist Malcolm Bradbury in 1960 has one character refer to the Dryden lines: «great wits are thus to madness near allied»²¹.

All these are fairly earnest and staid allusions to the well-known idea of the proximity of genius and madness. But there is another side of the case to be considered. Plato is at times somewhat tongue-in-cheek in reducing poets to the status of mindless maniacs (*vid.* the humor implicit throughout the «Ion», as Socrates manhandles the naive rhapsode). The idea of mental instability was

¹⁶ *Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, New York 1951, 94. This phrasing suggests Seneca; elsewhere, p. 341, Burton treats the topic more as Aristotle had done in the *Problemata*.

¹⁷ *Sixty-nine Enigmatical Characters, all Very exactly drawn to the Life...*, 2nd ed., London 1665, 27.

¹⁸ London 1725, 165-66.

¹⁹ «Fear and Trembling», *Fear and Trembling: The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. WALTER LOWRIE (New York 1954) 116.

²⁰ In his journal of 1843 he again records the phrase: «*Nullum exstitit magnum ingenium sine aliqua dementia*». *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, 7 vols., Bloomington, Ind. & London 1967, I, 450 (entry 1029). Flaubert treats the idea as a tired cliché. Under «Genie» in *Le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* (1881), he defines genius as «une névrose».

²¹ *Eating People Is Wrong*, New York 1960, 16.

frequently developed in terms of Bacchic celebrations and associated with plentiful infusions of the grape. Even Aristotle in *Problemata* 30 rather pointedly develops the analogy between various degrees of those afflicted by black bile and the stages of drunkenness. Seneca, too, refers to Bacchic celebration in the *De Tranquillitate Animi*, and the whole finale of his treatise with its surprising turn from tranquillity to festive flights and intoxicated holidays gives the passage an import of intemperance, playfulness, and humor. Renaissance authors also detected and fostered these comedic overtones.

In his packet of paradoxes (1707), John Dunton argues (in no. 125) that «The greatest Scholars are the greatest Asses». He mentions that learned men «miss the Matter»²².

I say miss the Matter, for even Aristotle the Prince of Philosophers said, there is never any great Wit, *sine mixtura dementiae*, without a mixture of Madness²³.

With like facetiousness, Thomas Nashe (1600) praises the effects of wine on scholars. He cites Plato, and then adds:

Aristotle saith, *Nulla est magna scientia absque mixtura dementiae*. There is no excellent knowledge without mixture of madness. And what makes a man more made in the head then wine?²⁴

And again, we find Montaigne (1582) using the concept generally to debunk wisdom in his own paradoxical «Apologie de Raimond Sebond»:

Comme elle [l'ame] lasse aussi et trouble ordinairement soymesmes. Qui la desment, qui la jette plus coustumierement à la manie que sa promptitude, sa pointe, son agilité, et en fin sa force propre? Dequoy se faict la plus subtile folie, que de la plus subtile sagesse?... Aux actions des hommes insansez, nous voyons combien proprement s'avient la folie avecq les plus

²² Dunton's citation of verses wherein so-called wise men «throw out, and miss the matter» is taken from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, 1678, I.i.186. The idea doubtless derives from LaRochehoucauld's *Maximes*, 1664-1665; no. 377 in the 4th ed. of 1675 asserts: «Le plus grand défaut de la pénétration n'est pas de ne pas aller au but, c'est de la passer»; *Maximes*, Paris 1967, 380.

²³ *Athenian Sport: or, Two Thousand Paradoxes Merrily Argued, To Amuse and Divert the Age. By a Member of the Athenian Society*, London 1707, 516.

²⁴ «Summers Last Will and Testament», *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKERROW, corr. F. P. Wilson. 5 vols., Oxford 1958, III, 265.

vigoureuses operations de nostre ame. Qui ne sçait combien est imperceptible le voisinage d'entre la folie avecq les gaillardes elevations d'un esprit libre et les effets d'une vertu supreme et extraordinaire?²⁵

(For the mind wearies and usually troubles itself. What deranges it, what thrusts it customarily into madness than its own quickness, its own pungency, its own agility, and, finally, its own force? What causes the most subtle folly but the most subtle wisdom?... By the actions of madmen, we see how closely allied to madness are the most vigorous activities of our mind. Who does not know how imperceptible is the proximity between madness and the hearty elevations of a free mind or between madness and the effects of a supreme and extraordinary virtue?)

We notice that Montaigne, with his suggestion of *voisinage*, plays up the proximities and intermeshing boundaries of sanity and madness, just as Dryden was to do after him.

Samuel Butler follows suit. With persistent irony, Samuel Butler (1674) repeatedly stresses the absurd paradox that there is no distinction between honesty and vice, between sanity and Bedlam:

There's but the twinckling of a *Star*
Between a Man of *Peace* and *War*,
A *Thief* and *Justice*, *Fool* and *Knave*,
A huffing *Officer* and a *Slave*,
A crafty-*Lawyer* and *Pick-pocket*,
A great *Philosopher* and a *Block-head*...²⁶.

And particularly striking is the notion that boundary-lines break down; that there is no separation between right and wrong, left and right:

Great Wits and Valours, like great States,
Do sometimes sink with their own weights:
Th'extreams of Glory, and of Shame,
Like East and West, become the same...²⁷.

Lastly, we come upon the indefatigable and teeming wit of Jonathan Swift, one of the great satiric comedians of all time. In his hands, many of the Senecan

²⁵ Essai II.12, in *Essais de Montaigne*, ed. Maurice Rat. 2 vols., Paris 1962, I, 544-45. Essai II.2 paraphrases Seneca.

²⁶ *Hudibras* II.iii.957-62, in *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders, Oxford 1967, 179.

ideas are given their most apt and ample development. In *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), posing as a Modern hack-writer, Swift suavely devises a Digression in praise of Madness:

NOR shall it any ways detract from the just Reputation of... A Person whose Intellectuals were overturned, and his Brain shaken out of its Natural Position; which we commonly suppose to be a Distemper, and call by the Name of *Madness* or *Phrenzy*. For, if we take a Survey of the greatest Actions that have been performed in the World, under the Influence of Single Men; which are, *The Establishment of New Empires by Conquest: The Advance and Progress of New Schemes in Philosophy; and the contriving, as well as the propagating of New Religions*: We shall find the Authors of them all, to have been Persons, whose natural Reason hath admitted great Revolutions...²⁸.

Thus does Swift blithely reduce so-called Modern «Great Men» to the level of lunatics²⁹. Nor does he neglect to play with and tease concerning the vanishing «borders» and «neighborhoods» between good and evil, sanity and madness:

AND, whereas the mind of Man, when he gives the Spur and Bridle to his Thoughts, doth never stop, but naturally sallies out into both extreams of High and Low, of Good and Evil; His first Flight of Fancy, commonly transports Him to Idea's of what is most Perfect, finished, and exalted; till having soared out of his own Reach and Sight, not well perceiving how near the Frontiers of Height and Depth, border upon each other³⁰; With the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II.i.269-72, p. 108. In his notes, Wilder refers us to W579 in M. P. Tilley's *A Dictionary of The Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1966). This proverb (on p. 738) is: «Great Wits (Poets) to madness sure are near allied».

²⁸ «A Tale of a Tub», Sec. IX, in *A Tale of a Tub To Which is added The Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 2nd ed., Oxford 1958, 162. P. 163 adds that vapours rise to the brains of such distempered men (as the ancients had maintained about black bile) where they «water the Invention».

²⁹ We have descended a good deal from the «*vir magnus*» of ancient times, of the kind Cicero refers to in our epigraph. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the term «Great Man» is employed as a sarcasm, referring to successful thieves, cut-throats, and politicians. From c. 1725-1745, the term most regularly alluded to Robert Walpole, England's Prime Minister. See Henry Fielding's *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild The Great* (1743); and also William R. Irwin, *The Making of «Jonathan Wild»* (Hamden, Conn. 1966), esp. 22-32, 44-55, and, more generally, Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and The Wits* (Lincoln, Nebraska & London 1976).

³⁰ Swift is doubtless punning here on the ambiguous Latin word, *altus*, suggestive of both high and low, up and down. Needless to say, any missile overshoot, or any Overreacher, will miss the mark, and tumble from High to Low.

same Course and Wing, he falls down plum into the lowest Bottom of Things; like one who travels the East into the West...³¹.

Furthermore, Swift's reference, in this last passage, to Man's mind giving «the Spur and Bridle to his Thoughts», so that he gallops away to extremes, directly mimics Seneca's great concluding lines in the *De Tranquillitate Animi* describing the excited and agitated mind:

... desciscat oportet a solito et efferatur et mordeat frenos et rectorem rapiat suum...

([The mind] must revolt from the customary, must be carried away, champing at the bit, sweeping its rider along...)

The equine imagery in both passages is surely meant to suggest Pegasus, the winged horse³². And in both places there are suggestions of a horse engaging in frenzied flight. Jonathan Swift likes this idea so well that in the *Tale of a Tub* he utilizes it in two additional places.

... when a Man's Fancy gets *astride* on his Reason, when Imagination is at Cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense, is Kickt out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself...³³.

And again:

... even, I my self, the Author of these momentous Truths, am a Person, whose Imaginations are hard-mouth'd, and exceedingly disposed to run away with his *Reason*, which I have observed from long Experience, to be a very light Rider, and easily shook off...³⁴.

What had fired Swift's imagination in these passages was his contemplation of the outrageous pride and insolence of ignorant Moderns who believed that they owed no debts whatsoever to the past, who egotistically assumed that they could

³¹ *Tale of a Tub*, Sec. VIII, pp. 157-58. The echoing of *Hudibras* is apparent here.

³² As noted in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, 2nd ed., Oxford 1978, 794, Pegasus created Hippocrene, the fountain of the Muses on Mount Helicon; hence, he is regularly associated with poetry, inspiration, and creative flights.

³³ *Tale of a Tub*, p. 171.

³⁴ *Tale of a Tub*, p. 180. Pegasus had also been known for throwing his rider, the hero Bellerophon, when that hero, aiming too high, attempted to ride to heaven.

experiment and generate a whole world out of their own barren selves³⁵. Swift brilliantly reveals that such isolationists, such solipsists, are totally out of their wits. But Swift does so by managing to exhume the very past of Aristotle and Seneca that the mindless Moderns had banished and mislaid. The result is a staggering display of genius in weaving together threads of antiquity and modernity, of tradition and invention.

What had sparked Seneca's creative fecundity was the urge to deviate from standard treatises inculcating tranquillity and peace of mind that had in their unctuous straight-lacedness and high-mindedness tended to become soporific and unreal. Seneca wished to veer away from traditional Stoic thought in order to face modern man as he was: nervous, tense, overwrought, and self-divided. By confronting man's own internal inconsistencies, and by realizing the weakness of human nature, he acknowledged man's need for vacation, festivity, wine, and release from tension. Such an endorsement of frivolity shocks one's conventional sense of tranquillity. Thus, Seneca simultaneously employs the traditions of treatise, dialogue, and consolation while deviating sharply from them. The result is a shrewd new psychological realismdash well as a good deal of playfulness, insight, and wit. His perennial influence is one of the key signals certifying his worth.

³⁵ Samuel Johnson in *Rambler* 154 (1751) precisely describes the sins of the age that Swift assaulted: «The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity. The wits of these happy days have discovered a way to fame, which the dull caution of our laborious ancestors durst never attempt; they cut the knots of sophistry which it was formerly the business of years to untie, solve difficulties by sudden irradiations of intelligence, and comprehend long processes of argument by immediate intuition».