



THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

STOIC POETRY



SOME THOUGHTS ON STOIC POETRY AND FELLOW TRAVELERS

BY MITCH LEVENTHAL, FCSP

For the past several years, I have collected poetry which reflect Stoic philosophy and sensibility. Along the way, I have come across some excellent and inspiring poems. In this short article, I will share several of my favorite Stoic poems along with one particular poem - a perennial favorite incorrectly regarded by many as Stoic - which I would argue should be denied a place in the Stoic poetic canon.

Among my favorite poems is one focused on vanity and hubris. Marcus Aurelius often wrote on this topic:

Consider...how swiftly all things fall prey to oblivion, and the abyss of boundless time that stretches in front of you and behind you, and the hollowness of renown, and the fickleness and fatuousness of those who make a show of praising you, and the narrowness of the confines in which this comes to pass; for the earth in its entirety is merely a point in space, and how very small is this corner of it in which we are dwelling; and even here how few there will be, and of what a nature, to sing your praises. (Meditations 4:3).

One who feels a passionate desire for posthumous fame fails to recognize that everyone who remembers him will die very swiftly in his turn, and then again the one who takes over from him, until all memory is utterly extinguished as it passes from one person to another and in succession is lit and then snuffed out. (Meditations 4:19)

Here is what Percy Bysshe Shelley gifted us on this topic:

Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:
' My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

[A]ll things are swift to fade and become mere matter for tales, and swiftly too oblivion covers their every trace. And here I am speaking of those who shone forth with a wonderful brightness; as for the rest, the moment that they breathed their last, they were "out of sight, out of mind". And what does it amount to, in any case, everlasting remembrance? Sheer vanity and nothing more." (Aurelius, 2011, 4:33)

[R]eflect...that just as sand dunes are always drifting over one another and concealing what came before, so in life also, what comes earlier is very swiftly hidden by all that piles up afterward. (Aurelius, 2011, 7:34)

Poets are particularly attracted to the subject of mortality, as are philosophers. Fear of death is particularly paralyzing for many. The Stoics put tremendous energy into understanding death's true significance to life. Marcus posed this scenario to himself:

Imagine the gods informed you, “You will die tomorrow, or at any rate, the day after tomorrow”, you would consider it no great matter whether it were the day after tomorrow rather than tomorrow, unless, indeed, you were a terrible coward, for the difference is minimal; so likewise, consider it no great matter whether you will die after many a long year rather than tomorrow. (Aurelius, 2011, 4:47)

Memento Mori (A Sonnet) by John W. Leys

Went down the desert where the vultures feed
On human flesh rotting in the sunshine.
Pluck eyes, testicles, suck out the seed.
Bloated remains, corpses, on which they dine.
Bereft of life, we all end up a meal
For buzzards, for jackals, microbes and worms.
Most don't want to admit that death is real,
It's a truth with which all must come to terms.
If you live like you'll last a thousand years
The time to be a good man will ne'er come.
You'll end your life with your soul in arrears,
Fighting the fate you can ne'er escape from.
Slaves to fear and death are ne'er truly free,
Socrates didn't fear death, why should we?

Marcus Aurelius wrote, “You are a little soul carrying a corpse around, as Epictetus used to say” (Aurelius, 2011, 4:41).

The first two poems just shared focus narrowly on themes of vanity, hubris and mortality, and align neatly to many of Marcus' near poetic and often aphoristic thoughts. The next two poems I will share are far more comprehensive in their philosophic scope. One might say that these most closely map to the entirety of Stoicism versus any specific quotation.

The poem *If-*, by Rudyard Kipling, is a perennial favorite of many. Its only flaw, in my view, is that it is written strictly from a strictly masculine perspective when all of the points made are equally applicable to women.

This is particularly ironic since Kipling, as a young man, was introduced to Stoicism by an older woman (Lycett 1999).

Musonius Rufus was adamant that men and women were equally capable of studying philosophy and living virtuous lives:

Women have received from the gods the same ability to reason that men have...[W]omen have the same senses as men, sight, hearing, smell, and all the rest. Likewise each has the same parts of the body, and neither sex has more than the other.

In addition, it is not men alone who possess eagerness and a natural inclination towards virtue, but women also. Women are pleased no less than men by noble and just deeds, and reject the opposite of such actions. Since that is so, why is it appropriate for men to seek out and examine how they might live well, that is, to practice philosophy, but not women? Is it fitting for men to be good, but not women? (Rufus, 2011, p. 28)

Still, *If-* stands out as an excellent Stoic poem which appears not to deviate from original Stoic precepts, and which is equally relevant to women as to men.

IF- by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Perhaps the most perfect Stoic poem from my perspective is *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann. I have no criticisms to make, only gratitude to express.

Desiderata by **Max Ehrmann**

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexations to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain and bitter;
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.
Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.
Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.
Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment
it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.

And now for my *bête noir*, *Invictus*. This excellent poem by William Ernest Henley speaks to human dignity and perseverance in the face of untold obstacles - all Stoic themes. I would, however, argue that, at best, the poet was a philosophical *fellow traveler*, and not a practicing Stoic. In the final couplet, he states: "I am the master of my Fate..." This is contrary to Stoic understanding of Fate and the Discipline of Desire. As Epictetus explained:

[T]rue education consists precisely in this, in learning to wish that everything should come about just as it does. And how do things come about? As the one who ordains them has ordained... It is with this order of things in mind that we should approach our education, and not so as to change the existing order of things (for that has not been permitted to us, nor would it be better that it should be), but rather, things around us being as they are and as their nature dictates, so that we for our part may keep our will in harmony with whatever comes to pass.
(Epictetus, 2011,1.12.15-17)

Invictus by **William Ernest Henley**

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Fate is that which is outside our control; we are only masters of our own souls. Were I alive and known to Henley, I would have suggested he change the final couplet like so:

I am not the master of my fate,
But I am the captain of my soul.



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