

Blinded by the Vice. A Reading of Seneca's Letter 50

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Abstract

This paper offers a reading of Seneca's *Ep. 50*, focusing on the opening anecdote, the story of the fool slave Harpaste, who suddenly became blind but thought that it was the outside that had darkened rather than her sight. Harpaste is a speaking name, which hints at her being a joke of nature and at her becoming blind. She is foolish, mad and blind, so she represents in many respects our actual condition: we all are foolish, so we act like mad people, blinded by our vices. Yet her blindness is due to a physical disease while ours is ethical, and it is due to our moral feebleness. Besides the medical metaphor, the main semantic field of the letter is that of learning and knowing: this leads us to understand that our moral diseases come from a refusal to admit our limits, that is, to know ourselves, which is the first and crucial step towards wisdom.

Keywords: Seneca, *Moral epistles*, Blindness, Harpaste, 'Know thyself', Vices

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una lectura de Séneca, *Ep. 50*, centrándose en la anécdota inicial, la historia de la esclava tonta Harpaste, que de repente se quedó ciega, pero pensó que era el exterior lo que se había oscurecido y no su vista. Harpaste es un nombre hablante, que insinúa que ella es una broma de la naturaleza y aún más al volverse ciega. Es tonta, loca y ciega, por lo que representa en muchos aspectos nuestra condición actual: todos somos tontos, por eso actuamos como locos, cegados por nuestros vicios. Sin embargo, su ceguera se debe a una enfermedad física, mientras que la del ser humano es ética y se debe a su debilidad moral. Además de la metáfora médica, el principal campo semántico de la letra es el de aprender y conocer: esto nos lleva a comprender que las enfermedades morales provienen de una negativa a admitir nuestros límites, es decir, a conocernos a nosotros mismos, que es el primer y crucial paso hacia la sabiduría.

Palabras clave: Séneca, *Epístolas morales*, ceguera, Harpaste, 'conócete a ti mismo', vicios

Blinded by the light
Revved up like a deuce
Another runner in the night...
(B. Springsteen, *Blinded by the Light*)

Introduction

As a Stoic, Seneca is an intellectualist: knowing and discerning good from bad necessarily leads to correct action, which is also the natural one, because in order to act well one must act according to nature.

That notwithstanding, Seneca never underestimates the difficulty of learning and understanding: it is a slow and complicated process with stops, regressions, impeded by personal and often unsurmountable limits. These difficulties engender a fundamental contradiction: if nature is good, and one is part of it, why is it so difficult to discern right from wrong? His answer is: a lack of will. We prefer to give in to our vices, ascribing them to society while they depend on us¹.

To discuss this argument, I am going to focus on Seneca's *Letter 50*, a text where the philosopher exposes his reasoning (but also significantly leaves some questions unanswered) and relies on various medical metaphorical mappings, whereby vice is cast as a disease (especially blindness) and a moral deviation. I will first provide an overview of the letter, then an analysis of its structure and of the semantic fields of learning and self-improvement. The argument will start by, and conclude on, the core of the letter, i.e. Harpaste's example. I will show how she represents a living metaphor of moral blindness.

1. *Letter 50: an overview*

The letter, as it often happens in Seneca, opens with witty autobiographical anecdotes and pithy sayings (1-2), followed by deeper and more general considerations (3-6) and a final, positive exhortation (7-8).

Because he received Lucilius' letter with a long delay, Seneca does not ask him about his moral progress but touches on it himself, pointing out how we ascribe our vices to time and places, while, in fact, they depend only on us (1). He then quotes an example: his fool Harpaste, an unpleasant heritage from his wife², who eventually became blind, but thought that it was the outside that had darkened rather than that her sight had declined (2). The same thing happens to all of us. We impute our vices - ambition, luxury, angriness - to contemporary way of life, but we are fully responsible for them. And yet, even if we are as blind as that woman, we wander without a guide: we do not acknowledge our issues, and we do not look for a doctor who can help us heal. As a consequence, our disease keeps worsening (3-4). We must learn how to live correctly, which is no impossible task, just as it is not impossible to straighten a bent board. Moral strengthening should actually come easier since spirit is far softer than wood (5-6). At present, vices possess us, but it is a feeble possession, because they are not inherent to our nature; on the contrary, once we apprehend virtue, it stays with us, because it is part of our original nature (7-8).

¹ BELLINCIONI (1978), 15-69; LOTITO (2001), 69-76; ROSKAM (2005), 60-97; for ancient Stoicism, VEGETTI (1983). Specifically, on moral judgements, BARNEY (2003); INWOOD (2005), 201-233.

² This passage is traditionally quoted as evidence for the fact that Seneca had a wife who died (or from whom he divorced) before marrying Paulina; yet GLOYN (2104), 243-244, interprets it as referencing Paulina herself.

2. *We Are All Harpaste*

The main metaphorical field to which Seneca recurs here is one of his favorites: medicine³. In this case, it is interesting that he starts by an actual illness - which is indeed, as we shall see, a double illness, and then arrives at the moral application of it by a simile. After having become blind, Harpaste thought that her inability to see was caused by darkness outside her. Our condition is a form of blindness, too, but, as we shall see, at a moral level (below, 2.1 and 2.2); this condition is even worse than Harpaste's, because, unlike her, we even refuse to follow a guide, Seneca says.

The story of Harpaste illustrates the core point of the letter: even at first sight, we understand that it is not just a funny story but has important philosophical implications, which concern precisely the possibility of knowing something - more precisely, knowing ourselves (see below, section 3).

While *Letter 50* as a whole has been neglected by Senecan scholars, Harpaste gained a certain amount of interest in scholarship devoted to diseases, and the so-called dark irony they sometimes elicit⁴. This is undoubtedly an interesting point of view; and yet we cannot see Harpaste alone, without comparing her to us. Seneca's sarcasm towards her was typical of his age, but the main point at issue in letter 50 is not the irony towards Harpaste, but the irony towards ourselves and our inability, which turns into a refusal, to admit our flaws (below, section 2.1). Furthermore, this figure offers a network of philosophical implications and connections which shed light on the interpretation of the letter as a whole.

Let us start with her name, which is a speaking name, as it often happens in Seneca. Indeed the neuter substantive *harpaston*⁵ is a Greek transliteration, etymologically linked with *harpazo*, "to snatch", which we find in Latin in two meaningful occurrences: a ball game (Mart. IV 19, 6)⁶ and an eyewash (*CIL* XIII 10021). In my opinion, both meanings are in play in this context: play with a ball because, as Seneca points out (50, 2-3), Harpaste is considered as living entertainment in the time's social culture; and the eyewash, because she becomes blind. Thus, in this case, her name expresses both her social status *and* her destiny.

2.1. *Harpaste as a Fool*

Harpaste's name, thus, has a double-meaning, and the same goes for her disease. Indeed, there is not only one illness at issue. The woman who is the subject of the episode is not only blind; she is mad, (a condition, we can maliciously add, which is made worse by the fact that she is a woman, i.e. a being who is by nature far less intelligent than a man, at least according to the ancients' view, which Seneca shares)⁷.

³ ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (1989), 136-138; SJÖBLAD (2015), 27-34; GAZZARRI (2020), esp. 171-198.

⁴ BEARD (2014), 145; KIDD (2014), 42-43; KATZANTZIDIS-TSOUMPRÁ (2018), 275-276. For the medical issues (blindness etc.) see below.

⁵ *ThL* VI 3, 2540, 20-24.

⁶ Martial underlines that this ball has to be 'snatched' (*harpaston a manu pulverulenta rapis*).

⁷ With few and partial exceptions, such as those of Marcia and his mother Helvia (POCINA, 2003).

More precisely: she is first mad, and then blind: her absurd behavior depends on this unique set of conditions. Therefore, when Seneca maintains that we are like her, he is suggesting that we are blind from agnoseological point of view: in other words, that we cannot identify anything, and especially our condition, clearly. But he is also defining us as out of our minds, and this is the reason why we cannot acknowledge our vices. So, we are mad, i.e. we cannot understand or know anything, and so, even if we are not physically blind, we are at a cognitive level. The ground for this sentence is the famous Stoic assertion according to which “all fools are mad”⁸. Given the Stoic correspondence between body and soul, it is easy to shift from the medical and technical condition of mental illness to metaphorical and psychological ‘madness’⁹.

In this particular case, Seneca uses a specific adjective to define madness: *fatua*. A rare word, which Seneca uses elsewhere only in the *Apocolocyntosis*¹⁰. It is worth trying to understand if there are philosophical reasons for this unusual word-choice.

Fatuus derives from *fari*, and generally connotes someone who cannot understand what he says and what other people say (Isid. *Etym.* X 103). A significant instance of this use we find at Catullus 83, 2, where Lesbia’s husband is termed *fatuus* because he does not understand that Lesbia is blaming Catullus because she is in love with the poet. In the case of Seneca’s *Ep.* 50, the adjective in question probably stands as a technical term for those ‘fools’ which rich people used to carry along for entertainment. Although we cannot quote any other occurrence of *fatuus* referencing this habit, the context of the Senecan passage nonetheless suggests it. In this regard, a note by Isidorus comes in handy. The etymologist quotes a sentence by the second century BCE comic poet Afranius and distinguishes between *stultus* and *fatuus* (*Etym.* X 246):

«Stultus, hebetior corde, sicut quidam ait [Afran. 416 R.]:

Ego me esse stultum existimo: fatuum esse non opino,

id est obtunsis quidem sensibus, non tamen nullis. Stultus est qui per stuporem non movetur iniuria; saevitiam enim perfert nec ultus est, nec ulla ignominia commovetur dolore».

«Stolid, rather dull in spirit, as a certain writer says: “I consider myself to be stolid; I don’t think myself a fool”. That is, with dulled wits, not with none at all. A stolid person is one who in his stupor is not moved by injustice, for he endures and does not avenge cruelty, and is not moved to grief by any dishonor» (Trans. BARNEY, 2006).

Fatuus is in a way a step beyond *stultus*, the average term for the non-sage. Of course, we cannot apply a Stoic sense to Afranius’ verse; yet, as Armisen-Marchetti has pointed out, this word has been deliberately chosen by Seneca instead of a

⁸ See below, and STOK (1981), esp. 10-13.

⁹ Below, 128-129.

¹⁰ *Apocol.* 1 and 11, 2, in both cases Seneca alludes to Claudius’ dumbness.

philosophical term, because of its vividness and frequency in common language¹¹. So we may infer that the semantic characterization of *stultus* in the Stoic sense was present to the philosopher, as is shown in another letter (15, 9):

«Quam nunc tu vitam dici existimas stultam? Babae et Isonis? Non ita est: nostra dicitur, quos caeca cupiditas in nocitura, certe numquam satiatura praecipitat».

«What life do you suppose is that being called foolish? That of Baba and Ison? That's not it: it is ours that is meant. Blind avarice hurls us toward things that may harm and certainly will not satisfy us» (Trans. GRAVER-LONG, 2015, here and below).

Here, Seneca distinguishes between our stupid life (*stulta vita*), which is subjected to a blind vice (*caeca cupiditas*), and that of two jesters¹², who are actually foolish, and thus may be labelled as *fatui*.

Indeed, *stultus* is someone who misses something, but he is still considered capable of reasoning. On the contrary, *fatuus* refers to someone who is completely obtuse, who is incapable of any form of understanding. Thus, the fool Harpaste is not only a *stulta*, she represents an even worse condition. Given the fact that Seneca compares us to Harpaste, we too are worse than *stulti*, in that we are not unable to understand anything, but - and this is far worse - we actually *refuse* to do it, thus rejecting the evidence for our viciousness. We are not blinded by a disease like the innocent fool: we are blinded by our own fault. In other words, we do not want to acknowledge that our cognitive impairment is due to us, while she is incapable to do this. So, she is not responsible for her flaws, while we are.

2.2. Harpaste's Blindness

Let us focus on the woman's blindness.

Blindness has a double-faced story in antiquity: on the one hand, it is a sort of magical condition which endows a person with the ability to see more with their mind's eye than others with their visual organs (e.g. in the case of Homer and Tiresias); on the other hand, blindness is a disease which cuts men off from social life and, as a consequence, leaves humans in an intermediary state between life and death, as is the case with Oedipus.

From a metaphorical point of view¹³, we can also reference a double level: sight is a sense linked to exteriority, and as such it is subject to mistakes and relies on appearances. Yet it is crucial for the process of learning. Thus, the idea of an imperfect sight is frequent in Seneca, with special reference to some peculiar expressions and ideas, among which we can quote the *imbecillitas oculorum*, «febleness of the eyes»

¹¹ ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (2009), 349-357.

¹² Cf. GRAVER-LONG (2015), 514.

¹³ ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (1989), 144-145 and 174-176; GAZZARRI (2020), 102-109. On the relevance of the sense of sight in Seneca, SOLIMANO (1992), 14-18.

due to some diseases¹⁴, and the *caligo mentis*, «blurring of mind»¹⁵. The two images display different representations of our vision and the attendant understanding and learning processes. In the first case, especially frequent in reference to natural phenomena, our eyes are constitutionally feeble, and this implies that we have to make an effort to correct their mistakes, e.g. with a specific eyewash and a light therapy¹⁶. In the second case, Seneca represents the blurring as a sort of veil caused by our vices, which philosophy can rip off, thus giving us the hope of seeing (and so understanding) correctly. This time, the impairment of sight is not connatural but due to something external, and so it is quite easy to provide a definite cure.

As for physiological blindness, Seneca otherwise cites it as an example of apparent misfortune which the sage could endure (*Prov.* 5, 2; *Ep.* 9, 4; 92, 22): people consider loss of sight as one of the most terrible things a man can suffer, and the historical examples quoted are Appius Claudius Caecus, the famous politician of the ancient Republic, and Lucius Caecilius Metellus, a former consul who apparently lost his sight while trying to save the Palladium from the fire of the temple of Vesta in the third century BCE¹⁷. The aforementioned *exempla* represent exceptional men who tolerate blindness without losing their good spirits; it is no surprise that a dull person like Harpastes fails in the task. Moreover, blindness is explicitly compared to «madness» (*insania*) in a context where there is a comparison between not loving someone's parents, which is a vice, *impietas*, and not recognizing them, which is *insania* (*Ben.* III 1, 5)¹⁸. This confirms my interpretation of the case of the *fatua* Harpaste as something exceptional and more problematic than the common vices of a *stultus*.

If we turn to passion imagery¹⁹, blindness is, from Homer on, the representation of passion taken to its extreme level. The Ate lamented by Agamemnon in *Il.* XIX as the cause of his unfair behaviour towards Achilles is not so far from the *caligo mentis* quoted above, but also close to the *caecitas* induced by, e.g. *furor* (*Herc. f.* 991; *Oed.* 590; *Thy.* 27) or *cupiditas* (*Pol.* 9, 5; *Const.* 2, 2; *Ep.* 15, 9), *aviditas*, *ambitio* (*Ben.* VII 2, 6; VII 26, 4), and so on. All these expressions are common in Latin poetry. In the case of *furor*, its correspondent passion *ira* is compared to an eye-disease (*Ir.* II 25, 1; III 39, 2): so, again, the situation of *Ep.* 50 does not concern a common, as it were 'normal' vice, but an extreme one.

Ate is far from having a precise meaning or interpretation; scholars still debate over it²⁰. Yet there are some common features on which scholars agree. A recent study

¹⁴ COURTIL (2015), 206-208 and 281-284. A list of different eyes pathologies in 536-538.

¹⁵ See SANTINI (1999), 357-360. Cf. *Vit. b.* 1, 1; *Brev.* 3, 1; *Ira* II 35, 5.

¹⁶ See e.g. *NQ* III 1, 2 (thermal waters); *Ep.* 94, 19-20 (light), with COURTIL (2015), 318-319 n. 2226. For medical therapy, cf. GAILLARD-SEUX (1998).

¹⁷ Cic. *Scaur.* 48; Sen. *Contr.* IV 2; VII 2, 7; Ov. *Fast.* VI 437.

¹⁸ *Vitiosi oculi sunt, qui lucem reformidant, caeci, qui non vident: et parentes suos non amare impietas est, non agnoscere insania.*

¹⁹ ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (1989), 176.

²⁰ See also *Il.* IX 505-7. On this concept from Homer on, DODDS (1973), 2-8 and 37-41; DAWE (1969), 95-123; CAIRNS (2012).

defines it a word which «covers both the harm that results from a human being's actions, and the harm to his mental faculties that causes that outcome in the first place»²¹.

It is worth quoting the lines which describe Ate as a personified entity (*Il. XIX 91-94*):

πρέσβα Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἄτη, ἥ πάντας ἄᾶται,
οὐλομένη· τῇ μὲν θ' ἀπαλοὶ πόδες· οὐ γὰρ ἐπ' οὔδει
πίλναται, ἀλλ' ἄρα ἦ γε κατ' ἀνδρῶν κράτα βαίνει
βλάπτουσ' ἀνθρώπους· κατὰ δ' οὔν ἕτερόν γε πέδησε.

«Ruin, Eldest daughter of Zeus, she blinds us all,
that fatal madness - she with those delicate feet of hers,
never touching the earth, gliding over the heads of men
to trap us all - She entangles one man, now another» (Trans. FAGLES, 1992).

In this passage, as the translation itself shows, *ate* and its correspondent verb *aao* clearly indicate a blindness of the mind, which impedes average logic and rationality²². The person who is hit by it is no longer in control of his actions, even if usually he is reasonable and balanced. Therefore, Ate is something which makes people go around like blind men.

And this is precisely what happens to all of us in *Ep. 50, 3*:

«Hoc quod in illa ridemus, omnibus nobis accidere liqueat tibi; nemo se avarum esse intellegit, nemo cupidum. Caeci tamen ducem quaerunt, nos sine duce erramus et dicimus: «Non ego ambitiosus sum, sed nemo aliter Romae potest vivere. Non ego sumptuosus sum, sed urbs ipsa magnas impensas exigit. Non est meum vitium, quod iracundus sum, quod nondum constitui certum genus vitae; adolescentia haec facit».

«You should be well aware that what we laugh about in her case happens to every one of us. No one realizes he is grasping or avaricious. The blind at least request a guide; we wander about without one, and say, «It's not that I am ambitious; this is just how one has to live at Rome. It's not that I overspend; it's just that city living demands certain expenditures. It's not my fault that I am prone to anger, that I do not yet have any settled plan of life - this is just what a young person does».

The interesting thing is that Seneca represent these 'us' in a fashion comparable to the Homeric Agamemnon, and the ancient Greeks in general: we ascribe to external causes the faults and flaws which depend on us. The structure of the speech is similar: first, the denial of responsibility; then, the ascription to an outside entity: ἐγὼ δ' οὐκ αἴτιός εἰμι, «it is not my fault» (*Il. XIX 86*), is the starting point of Agamemnon, and of the many Homeric characters who refuse to take direct responsibility for their

²¹ CAIRNS (2012), 14-15.

²² DOYLE (1984), 8-14. See also GEISSER (2002), 103. CORAY (2016), 55-58, interprets *ate* as «delusion», a choice which is not shared by the scholars previously quoted.

errors²³; *non ego ambitiosus sum*, «it's not that I am ambitious», start the 'we' of Seneca. On his side, Agamemnon lists three major deities, or precisely divine powers, as causes of Ate²⁴ before describing her; the 'we' of Seneca's letter, on the other side, ascribe everything to the city and their youth (*urbs ipsa, adulescentia*). In both cases, the causes of the error, or, in other words, of the passion, are considered external²⁵, with an attendant complete denial of any personal responsibility. Moreover, Ate is described as something which moves rapidly²⁶ on men's heads: this hints at the sudden, rapid, and unpredictable burning of passions, whose arrival we cannot see, and also, I guess, at the intellectual and moral wandering which is provoked by her. Moreover, the characterization of Erinys as ἡεροφοῖτις, whose meaning is most likely «she who flies through the mist» (*Il. XIX 87*)²⁷ - a sort of reduplication of *ate* - can be compared to the condition of men blinded by vices.

Evidence in support of this connection between the Greek poetic image and the Senecan one can be gleaned from Sophocles, *Ant. 620-624*:

[...] Σοφία γὰρ ἔκ του
κλεινὸν ἔπος πέφανται·
τὸ κακὸν δοκεῖν ποτ' ἔσθλον
τῶδ' ἔμμεν, ὅτῳ φρένας
θεὸς ἄγει πρὸς ἄταν·

«It was a wise man who told
how evil shows the fairest face,
to those whom the gods will destroy» (Trans. FAINLIGHT-LITTMAN, 2009).

Here, in the words of the chorus, *ate*, to which, again, a deity drives the mind, is responsible for a misunderstanding of what is good and bad, which is precisely the condition of the *stulti*, and more specifically of the one of letter 50.

I am here not suggesting that *Ep. 50* contains a conscious and intentional allusion to the Homeric passage (as seductive as this hypothesis might be). My contention is that Seneca is reworking the Stoic narration of passion through an original and witty story, which is in fact rooted in the concept of *ate*, the blinding impulse coming from outside: an idea which was well-known to each and any of his readers. In sum, the philosopher produces a low-style, comic version of a serious Homeric pattern: on the one side, he achieves that this pattern is immediately comprehensible to his readers (something which would not have happened if he had referred to dry, hyper-dialectic Stoic argumentations); on the other side, by lowering the level of discourse so drastically, Seneca deprives us of the support of an epic model for our hypocritical

²³ CAIRNS (2012), 28-30.

²⁴ *Il. XIX 87*, ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς καὶ Μοῖρα καὶ ἡεροφοῖτις Ἐρινύς.

²⁵ This does not happen always with *ate*, CAIRNS (2012), 33-36.

²⁶ The same image in *Il. IX 505-507*.

²⁷ Cf. CORAY (2016), 51-53 *ad locum*; *Il. IX 571-572*: «and the Erinys who flies through the night / heard her from Hell, she who has an unpitiful heart».

excuses and underlines the ridiculous condition shared by the majority of men, who are blinded without being conscious of it and always ready to jettison personal responsibility and to ascribe flaws to external causes²⁸.

Let us now go back to Seneca's intertext and check other recurrences of blindness in his works. An image which recalls Harpaste's story is that of those who move around in the dark, tripping on their own furniture: an image of voluntary, if temporary, blindness, for which Seneca *Ira* II 10, 1 provides two moral interpretations:

«Illud potius cogitabis, non esse irascendum erroribus. Quid etiam, si quis irascatur in tenebris parum vestigia certa ponentibus? Quid, si quis surdis imperia non exaudientibus? [...] Inter cetera mortalitatis incommoda et hoc est, caligo mentium nec tantum necessitas errandi sed errorum amor».

«You'll better contemplate this thought: errors shouldn't make us angry. What if one had to become angry at people unable to put one foot surely after another in the dark? Or at deaf people who don't listen to orders? [...] Among all those other disadvantages that are ours as mortals, there's this: the murkiness of our minds, whence both the inevitability of our mistakes and our fondness for the mistakes we make» (Trans. KASTER, 2010)

Seneca calls the action of walking in the dark an *error*, and he compares it to deafness. In the end, after other examples of such "going the wrong way", he provides a general definition of this attitude as a "blurring of mind", something which we not only do but also love. Here, we find the idea of *errare* (both «wandering aimlessly» and «making mistakes») linked to that of blindness (as is the case at *Ep.* 50, 2-3), and also to the idea of love for our moral wandering (i.e. our main fault corresponding to the apologetic speech at *Ep.* 50, 3).

Again, we find a similar image at *Vit. b.* 3, 1, with special reference to the opposition between appearance and reality:

«Quaeramus aliquod non in speciem bonum, sed solidum et aequale et a secretiore parte formosius: hoc eruamus. Nec longe positum est: inveniatur, scire tantum opus est quo manum porrigas: nunc velut in tenebris vicina transimus, offensantes ea ipsa quae desideramus».

«We should seek on something that is not good to look at, but robust and unvarying and more beautiful on its hidden side. We should recover it. It's not placed far away. It will be discovered: you only need to know where to extend your hand. For now, it is as if we are passing nearby things in the darkness, bumping up against exactly what we long for» (Trans. KER, 2014).

So, the same illustration previously attributed to one who does not know what he is doing (and is therefore not responsible for it), is here referred to a similar state of

²⁸ Something similar happens at Plutarch, *Mor.* 168B (= *Superstit.* 7) where the superstitious man deems *ate* responsible of all misfortunes.

unconsciousness but, in this case, the overtone is strictly cognitive. We do not recognize the true goods because we are blind. Even worse: we bump against the very things which we desire, and so we get hurt instead of taking pleasure from them.

With this apparently light and ironic story, Seneca shifts from Lucilius' good behavior to an all-encompassing (and negative) 'we' which comprehends each and any human being. But, as we shall see in the next section, the correspondences between the opening section and the corpus of the letter suggest that Lucilius is directly engaged in the discussion.

3. *The Semantic Field of Learning and Knowing in Letter 50*

We have seen at which point the story of Harpaste is connected with questions related to self-consciousness, learning, and knowing. If we analyze the semantic field of 'knowing-learning' in the letter, we can clearly see how the structure of the letter is grounded on these concepts. The main verbs utilized are *scio/nescio*, *intellego*, and *disco/dedisco*. In Latin, *scio* is the verb for an acquired knowledge, which can find practical application; *intellego* designates something one understands and that could be of use in the future²⁹; *disco* means 'to learn.' Thus, *disco* is related to a preliminary phase of the learning process; *intellego* represents a sort of second level, while *scio* refers to a process which culminates in acquired competences.

In the opening of the letter Seneca uses the verb *scio* in the first person (50, 1):

«Spero te sic iam vivere ut, ubicumque eris, sciam quid agas».

«But I hope that you are now living in such a way that I know how you are doing no matter where you are».

This is a sort of rewriting from a pedagogical angle of the 'know thyself' precept: it is not Lucilius who ought to know himself, but Seneca (as his teacher).

Among the things which Lucilius is surely doing, as part of his training, Seneca immediately introduces the main theme of the letter (50, 1):

«Quid enim aliud agis quam ut meliorem te ipse cotidie facias, [...] ut intellegas tua vitia esse quae putas rerum?»

«What other endeavor do you have than to make yourself a better person each day [...] to come to understand that what you think are flaws your situation are in fact flaws or yourself?»

So, to spur oneself on on the path of self-bettering is tantamount to recognizing one's personal responsibility for one's flaws. In order to illustrate this sentence Seneca narrates Harpaste's story. She is a *fatua* and a *prodigium*. This means that she is not a clown or something of this sort which the Romans were used to carry along for fun

²⁹ Cf. *OLD*, s.v. *intellego* 1 «to grasp mentally, understand, realize»; s.v. *scio* 1 «to know».

(*in illa ridemus*, 50, 3), but she is a monster or, in modern terms, a mentally ill person who was exhibited and considered fun because she would accidentally say nonsense and absurdities.

The third recurrence equally refers to her (50, 2):

«Incredibilem rem tibi narro, sed veram: nescit esse se caecam; subinde paedagogum suum rogat ut migret, ait domum tenebricosam esse».

«It is scarcely credible what I am telling you, and yet it is true: she does not know she is blind, but asks her attendant over and over for a change of apartments, saying that her quarters are not well lit».

She does not know, she does not understand that she has become blind. One of the most evident signs of a serious disease is that the patient refuses to admit it. The image of the fool ceaselessly moving here and there recalls the one of anxious men who always travel searching for tranquility, something impossible to find in the outside world, given its being a mental possession. The main text in which Seneca deals with this idea is *Ep.* 28. This letter presents lines of reasoning which are very similar to the ones expressed at *Ep.* 50. The philosopher starts with the exhortation to take care of one's soul, because external goods (such as places) do not affect the sensation of happiness (28, 1-2)³⁰:

«Hoc tibi soli putas accidisse et admiraris quasi rem novam quod peregrinatione tam longa et tot locorum varietatibus non discussisti tristitiam gravitatemque mentis? Animum debes mutare, non caelum. [...] Onus animi deponendum est: non ante tibi ullum placebit locus».

«Do you think you are the only one this has happened to? Are you amazed to find that even with such extensive travel, to so many varied locales, you have not managed to shake off gloom and heaviness from your mind? You must change the mind, not the venue. [...] You must shed the load which is on your mind: until you do that, no place will be pleasing to you».

This is the case with Harpaste: she too has a load on her mind, i.e. her mental illness, and she is, therefore, not able to give a correct evaluation of anything. In *Ep.* 28 Seneca seems to talk about distress (*tristitia*, 28, 1) and not vices: but this is because the protagonist is Lucilius, whom he never accuses of being subject to heavy passions. Indeed, ending his letter with a general conclusion, Seneca turns to vices in the proper sense and quotes a sentence by Epicurus, which in turn connects his reasoning in *Ep.* 28 with the opening of *Ep.* 50 on the importance of acknowledging our flaws (28, 9-10):

³⁰ The model for this epistle is clearly Horatius, *Ep.* I 11, esp. 27: *caelum, non animum mutant, qui trans maria currunt*. The theme itself is a commonplace (bibliography below, n. 31).

«Initium est salutis notitia peccati». Egregie mihi hoc dixisse videtur Epicurus; nam qui peccare se nescit corrigi non vult: deprehendas te oportet antequam emendes. [...] Ideo quantum potes te ipse coargue, inquire in te; accusatoris primum partibus fungere, deinde iudicis, novissime deprecatoris; aliquando te offende. Vale».

«Awareness of wrongdoing is the starting point for healing». Epicurus spoke very well here, I think, for he who does not know that he is doing wrong does not wish to be set right. Before you can reform yourself, you must realize your error. [...] Bring in accusation against yourself, as stringently as you can. Then conduct the investigation. Take the role of the accuser first, then the judge, and let that of the advocate come last. Offend yourself sometimes. Farewell».

Seneca ends the epistle with the same exhortation to self-examination with which he opens *Ep.* 50. Both letters focus on the fact that we ascribe our flaws (*tristitia gravitasque mentis*, 28, 1; ambition, anger, luxury, 50, 2) to some exterior conditions, which consist primarily of a physical place (different ones in *Ep.* 28; Rome in *Ep.* 50). On the contrary, our flaws depend only on us, and we can make ourselves better only if we start by acknowledging this simple truth. Not by chance, the subsequent *Ep.* 51, but also *Ep.* 55 and 56, deal with the question: «Is the place where we are relevant for tranquility?»³¹ *Ep.* 50 seems to reopen, if only indirectly, the question treated in *Ep.* 28, this time without the support of Epicurus and only with Stoic forces.

If we concentrate, again, on the frame of the letter, we will observe that the sentence about Harpaste, *nescit esse se caecam* («she does not know she is blind», *Ep.* 50, 2) is a rephrasing of the previous one: *ut intellegas tua vitia esse quae putas rerum* («to come to understand that what you think are flaws your situation are in fact flaws or yourself», *Ep.* 50, 1). The hyperbolic example shows the absurdity of our average behavior: the disregarding of our vices. This is what Seneca says right after this (50, 3):

«Hoc quod in illa ridemus omnibus nobis accidere liqueat tibi: nemo se avarum esse intellegit, nemo cupidum. Caeci tamen ducem quaerunt, nos sine duce erramus...»

«You should be well aware that what we laugh about in her case happens to every one of us. No one realizes he is grasping or avaricious...»

Harpaste is not aware of her blindness (*nescit*, 50, 2). Similarly - and this should be evident to us (*liqueat tibi*) - we do not realize (*intellegit*, 50, 3) that we are greedy or yearning. In both cases, a fundamental fault in the process of self-scrutiny, which has an internal cause, is totally ignored. Yet we are possibly even worse than Harpaste because we refuse a guide. This further fault looks like an indirect blame of Lucilius if he ever refused Seneca's teaching and thought that he did no longer need it.

Seneca's analysis of our vices is again ironic; and then he adds (50, 4):

³¹ See MONTIGLIO (2006), BERNO (2014).

«Non est extrinsecus malum nostrum: intra nos est, in visceribus ipsis sedet, et ideo difficulter ad sanitatem pervenimus quia aegrotare nescimus».

«Our trouble is not external to us: it is within, right down in the vital organs. The reason it is so difficult for us to be restored to health is that we do not realize we are sick».

In this passage, the identification of the reader with Harpaste becomes even more evident: the expression *aegrotare nescimus* («we do not realize we are sick») contains the same verb *nescio* which was applied to her at 50, 2, and another verb, *aegroto*, which is primarily medical in meaning. Not only our habit, but also our condition is identical to that of the mentally ill and blind woman. From now on, the idea of *scio/intellego*, with its implication of 'already learned concepts', disappears, and it is replaced by that of learning itself: *disco/dedisco*. This happens because Seneca first offers his analysis of the phenomenology of the event: indeed, a medical diagnosis. In other words, he describes what happens when people make some mistakes, and shows how this is always due to incorrect or missing (self)-knowledge. Seneca then prescribes a therapy, which consists precisely in *learning* and, in so doing, in filling this knowledge gap or amending misinterpretations. This is what we do not want to do, and for this reason, it is difficult for us to become better persons.

According to Seneca's analysis, we are ill because we refuse to ask a doctor for treatment: indeed, we are ashamed of learning how to be good (50, 5):

«Nemo difficulter ad sanitatem reducitur nisi qui ab illa defecit: erubescimus discere bonam mentem. [...] ne labor quidem magnus est, si modo, ut dixi, ante animum nostrum formare incipimus et recorrige quam indurescat pravitas eius».

«If it is difficult to guide us back into our natural path, it is only because we have deserted it. We blush to learn excellence of mind [...] But the work is not hard, provided we start in time, as I said, and begin to shape and straighten the mind before its perversities become ingrained».

This blushing is the ultimate reason for our difficulty to start shedding our vices. We are just like ill persons who are ashamed to see a doctor. It is worth noticing that *bona mens* is first of all a physiological conceit, which designates a «healthy mind». Indeed in this same letter, Seneca opposes it to the *aegra mens*, «ill mind» (50, 9), and defines philosophy, which corresponds here to *discere bonam mentem*, as *salutaris*, «healthy» (50, 9)³². A healthy mind - a normally operating mind, not a 'good' or 'special' mind - can learn and understand correctly, i.e. it can reason correctly. Thus, this illustration which references ethical and cognitive content, presents also a medical overtone. At sections 5 and 6, Seneca talks about serious diseases and introduces a peculiar image: that of a deformed wood beam which can be straightened and molded according to one's needs. All the more easily, can a tender and flexible material such

³² Cf. also *Ep.* 41, 1: *facis rem optimam et tibi salutarem si, ut scribis, perseveras ire ad bonam mentem*.

as pneumatic soul be straightened. The philosopher shifts perspective from difficulty (*labor*) to easiness of self-bettering³³.

4. *Learning and Healing: The Difficulty of Being Naturally Good*

Beginning from section 5, the semantic grid of learning is intertwined with that of healing, which is central to Harpaste's story. Furthermore, Seneca's reasoning tackles one of the key issues in Stoic philosophy, the inborn good nature of men³⁴. There is an apparent inconsistency between section 5 and section 7: in the fifth section, Seneca says that the way to self-improvement is hard only for someone who goes against his nature. What is implied here is the Stoic postulate according to which man is naturally good, while evilness intervenes as a consequence of voluntary deviation from the right and natural path. In the seventh section, he seems to maintain the opposite view (50, 7):

«Illud, mi Lucili, non est quod te inpediat quominus de nobis bene speres, quod malitia nos iam tenet, quod diu in possessione nostri est: ad neminem ante bona mens venit quam mala; omnes praecipitati sumus³⁵; virtutes discere vitia dediscere est».

«It is true that we now are inhabited by vice, and have been so for a long time; but this does not mean, dear Lucilius, that you should give up hope. No one acquires an excellent mind without first having a bad one. All of us have been taken over already, and to learn virtue is to unlearn one's faults».

Evil (*malitia*) owns us; she is *in possessione nostri*. We are under her power: we are constitutionally bad (*mala*, sc. *mens*), and only after having experienced this moral slavery, we may acquire a good, i.e. virtuous and healthy, mind (*bona mens*). This seems to mean that we are born evil, and that, with much struggle, we eventually try to become good. The idea of learning is paradoxically explained as a way of unlearning (*dediscere*). Through this logical shift Seneca reconnects with the Stoic idea of men as naturally good. Evil is something which is indeed very tempting and powerful, but is also exterior, unnatural to us, even if we experience it from early on. All we have to do to become good is to get rid of it, i.e. to come back to our original and natural goodness³⁶. Seneca's answer may come across as somewhat sophistic, yet it is less inconsistent than it could appear at first sight. As newborns, we are potentially good; but virtue's seeds have to be accurately cultivated for growing in the right way (*Ep.* 38). If we do not have the force to follow the right direction and lack the right guide, but instead trust our parents' and nurses' wishes for us to achieve material

³³ Here we find the metaphor of the philosopher as a craftsman, on which see CERMATORI (2014), 299-301.

³⁴ See above, n. 2.

³⁵ An expression which we find also at *Ep.* 75, 16: *praecipitati sumus, ad virtutem contendimus inter vitia districti*.

³⁶ Above, n. 34; ROSKAM (2005), 71.

goods, we immediately come under the attack of vices³⁷, and this is why we must get rid of these. This process leads to the 'madness' that all fools suffer according to the Stoic paradox. This is why we have to be forced (*cogo*, 50, 9) to go in the right direction³⁸.

The matter is germane to the famous Stoic exhortation to «follow one's nature». This is one's only duty to achieve goodness. But this process is not directed by instinct, or else we would all be effortlessly good. What then is the solution to the conundrum? Seneca solves it by referring this expression to one's self. To follow one's nature, one has to know oneself, to meditate about all one's actions. This does not come easy; we do not want to do it because it is difficult; it could be painful to see and admit things which we definitely do not like. This is why understanding 'one's nature' takes a long time, sometimes a lifetime.

The idea of getting rid of evil is reversed into its positive counterpart in the following section (50, 8):

«Sed eo maiore animo ad emendationem nostri debemus accedere quod semel traditi nobis boni perpetua possessio est; non dediscitur virtus³⁹ [...] Virtus secundum naturam est, vitia inimica et infesta sunt».

«Yet we may be of good cheer as we tackle the job of self-correction; for once we do come into possession of the good, it is ours forever. One does not unlearn virtue. [...] Virtue is in accordance with our nature; faults are inimical to it».

First, it was *malitia* which possessed us (*in possessione nostri*, 50, 7); now, we possess the good (*boni perpetua possessio*, 50, 8): and this is a permanent acquisition, because good is natural to us. Contrary to this, since vices are unnatural, they can be erased by our soul. On the one side, this process characterizes good as stronger than evil, since it corresponds to our nature; on the other side, the formal expressions are slightly inconsistent with the aforementioned position. In fact, good is described as an object which is *in our possession*, while in the case of evil the act of possession is inverted: we *were possessed* by it. This shows that evil has a far more powerful effect on us than good. How, then, can something which is unnatural, even contrary to our nature, be more powerful than what is natural? This depends on the influence that appearance and ignorance have on us. Moreover, weak souls are frightened by the idea of the unknown, and so they have to be led towards goodness by force (50, 9):

«Sed quemadmodum virtutes receptae exire non possunt facilisque earum tutela est, ita initium ad illas eundi arduum, quia hoc proprium inbecillae mentis atque aegrae est, formidare inexperta; itaque cogenda est ut incipiat».

³⁷ This process is technically defined as διαστροφή, «perversion» of our natural goodness; cf. BELLINCIONI (1978), 15-31; GRAVER (2007), 61-74.

³⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 90, 36 and 44-46, where early people are depicted as incorrupt but unable to become wise, while modern people are corrupted by bad influences but able to take the path to virtue.

³⁹ Cf. *Ep.* 76, 19: *stultitia ad sapientiam erepit, sapientia in stultitiam non revolvitur.*

«But even as virtues once attained cannot depart from us and keeping them is easy, so also it is arduous to begin attaining them. For it is characteristic of a mind that is weak and ill to fear what it has not yet experienced, so that it has to be forced to make a start».

Again, virtues are represented as objects that can be acquired and preserved. Here the medical imagery resurfaces through the expressions *inbecilla mens* (which recalls the *fatua* Harpaste) and *aegra* (sc. *mens*), which runs counter to the *mens bona* (50, 5, the ideal condition we strive for), and is thus characteristic of the *stulti*. In addition, it alludes to *aegrotare nescimus* (50, 4). So, in the final sections Seneca picks up again the medical image and traces a clear *Ringkomposition*. We are all ill, like Harpaste: yet, while she is irrecoverable, because of her congenital mental illness, in our case there is a concrete chance of healing, and contrary to what one would expect, therapy is pleasant from its onset (50, 9). Given the strict interaction between body and soul theorized by Stoicism, goodness is a consequence of health. The two ideas overlap, in the sense that a healthy mind *cannot* act badly and is naturally good.

Also the analogy drawn by Seneca between Harpaste's condition and ours is problematic. He avers, like he does elsewhere (e.g. *Ep.* 53), that diseases at their very start are easier to heal, but we cannot recognize them, and this is the reason why they get worse and more difficult to treat. But how can one ignore blindness? In *Ep.* 53 he speaks about muscular pains and light temperature, two symptoms that can actually signal a trivial indisposition, but can equally suggest severer diseases, like gout and high fever (53, 5-7)⁴⁰. This makes sense. But one cannot underestimate or even fail to perceive blindness. So, this case is worse than the others, because it entails a kind of voluntary delusion.

5. Conclusion

We have seen how in letter 50 Seneca focuses on the ideas of knowing oneself and learning. The main metaphorical vehicle for this moral debate is medicine. Harpaste, far from being only the protagonist of a fun story, represents the theoretical core of the letter. Indeed, she is a living metaphor: her blindness and her reaction to the disease are a concrete example of the effects of any extreme passion which can blind us. While she does not understand her condition, we do, and yet we still act like her. With this story of the blind woman, Seneca puts in front of our eyes some crucial postulates of his ethics: first, that we have to know ourselves in order to know something; second, that the greatest difficulty does not consist in our physical limits, but in our psychological deficiencies: we are terrified by the idea of knowing ourselves, and we try to avoid it at all cost. This is why we need a guide, a doctor, a mentor to force us to do the right thing. This is why we need Seneca.

⁴⁰ BERNO (2006), 67-83 *ad locum*.

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