

DISCOURSE ON CICERO

MONTESQUIEU

Translated by David Fott

Cicero¹ is, of all the ancients, the one who had the most personal merit, and whom I would prefer to resemble; there is not one of them who had possessed finer and greater qualities, who had loved glory more, who had acquired for himself a more solid glory, and who had arrived at it by less beaten paths.

Reading his works elevates the heart no less than the mind: his eloquence is entirely grand, entirely majestic, entirely heroic. One must see him triumph over Catiline; one must see him rise up against Antony; finally one must see him mourn for the deplorable remains of a dying liberty. Whether he tells about his actions or reports those great men who fought for the Republic, he becomes intoxicated with his own glory and with theirs. The boldness of his expressions makes one enter into the vivacity of his sentiments. I feel that he carries me along in his transports and takes me away in his movements. What portraits he paints of Brutus, Cassius, Cato! What fire, what vivacity, what rapidity, what a torrent of eloquence! For myself, I do not know whom I would prefer to resemble: the hero or the panegyrist.

If he sometimes seasons his talents with too much splendor, he is only expressing to me what he has already made me feel; he informs me about praises that are due him. I am not angry about being warned that this is not a simple orator who is speaking, but the liberator of the country and the defender of liberty.

He deserves the title of philosopher no less than Roman orator. One can even say that he has distinguished himself more in the Lyceum than on the platform: he is original in his books of philosophy, but he had many rivals in his eloquence.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The original text is from Montesquieu, Œuvres Complètes, vol. 1, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949), 93-98. I thank Sharon Krause, Clifford Orwin, and Thomas Pangle, whose suggestions saved the translation from a number of errors.

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He is the first, among the Romans, who rescued philosophy from the hands of scholars, and freed it from the confusion of a foreign language. He made it common to all men, like reason, and, in the commendations that he received from them, men of letters found themselves in accord with the people. I cannot then admire enough the depth of his arguments in a time when wise men distinguished themselves only by the strangeness of their clothing. I would wish only that he had come in an age more enlightened, and that he could have used those fortunate talents to discover truths—talents that served him only to destroy errors. One must admit that he left a horrible void in philosophy: he destroyed everything that had been imagined until then; one had to begin again and imagine anew; the human race went back, so to speak, into its infancy, and it was delivered to first principles.

What a pleasure to see him, in his book *On the Nature of the Gods*, make all the sects pass in review, confound all the philosophers, and mark each prejudice with some stain! Now he fights against these monsters; now he makes sport of philosophy. The champions whom he introduces destroy themselves; that one is confounded by this one, who finds himself beaten in turn. All these systems disappear one before another, and there remains, in the reader's mind, only contempt for the philosophers and admiration for the critic.

With what satisfaction does one not see him, in his book *On Divination*, free the Romans' spirit from the ridiculous yoke of the soothsayers and the rules of that art, which was the disgrace of pagan theology, which was established in the beginning, by the policy of magistrates, among unrefined people, and weakened, by the same policy, when they became more enlightened.

Now he unveils for us the charms of friendship and makes us feel all its delights; now he makes us see the advantages of age that reason enlightens and that saves us from the violence of the passions.

Now, forming our morals and showing us the extent of our duties, he teaches us what it is that is honorable and what it is that is useful; what we owe to society, what we owe to ourselves; what we ought to do as fathers or as citizens.

His morals were more austere than his mind. He conducted himself in his government of Cilicia with the disinterestedness of a Cincinnatus, of a Camillus, of a Cato. But his virtue, which had nothing unsociable about it, did not prevent him from enjoying the politeness of his age. One notices, in his moral works, an air of gaiety and a certain contentment of mind that mediocre philosophers do not know. He does not give precepts; but he makes them felt. He does not exhort to virtue; but he attracts to it. Read his works, and you will be disgusted for good with Seneca and his like, people sicker than those they

would cure, more desperate than those they console, more tyrannized by passions than those they would free of them.

Some people, accustomed to measure all heroes by that of Quintus Curtius,² have gotten a quite false idea of Cicero; they have regarded him as a weak, timid man, and they have directed a reproach against him that Antony, his greatest enemy, never directed against him. He avoided the peril because he knew it; but he no longer knew it when he could no longer avoid it. This great man always subordinated all of his passions, his fear and his courage, to wisdom and reason. I even venture to say: there is perhaps no man, among the Romans, who gave greater examples of strength and courage.

Is it not true that to declaim the *Second Philippic* before Antony, was to court certain death? That it was to make a generous sacrifice of his life on behalf of his offended glory? Let us then admire the courage and the boldness of the orator even more than his eloquence. Let us consider Antony, the most powerful among men, Antony, the master of the world, Antony, who dared all and who was able to do all that he dared, in a Senate that was surrounded by his soldiers, and where he was rather king than consul; let us consider him, I say, covered with confusion and ignominy, thunderstruck, crushed, obliged to hear what is most humiliating from the mouth of a man whom he might have killed one thousand times over.

Moreover, it was not only at the head of an army that he needed his firmness and his courage; the obstacles he had to suffer, in times so difficult for men of property, made death always present for him. All the enemies of the Republic were his: a Verres, a Clodius, a Catiline, a Caesar, an Antony—in short, all the villains of Rome—declared war on him.

It is true that there were occasions where the force of his mind seemed to abandon him: when he saw Rome torn by so many factions, he abandoned himself to grief, he let himself become downhearted, and his philosophy was less strong than his love for the Republic.

In that famous war that decided the destiny of the Universe, he trembled for his country; he saw Caesar approach with an army that had won more battles than it had legions. But what was his grief when he saw that Pompey abandoned Italy and left Rome exposed to the furor of the rebels! “After such a cowardly act,” he says, “I can no longer respect that man, who, very far from exiling himself from his country, as he did, ought to have died on the walls of Rome and buried himself under the ruins.”

Cicero, who had been observing the plans of Caesar for a long time, would have inflicted the fate of Catiline upon that ambitious man, if his prudence had been heard: “If my counsels had been followed,” says that orator to Antony, “the Republic would be flourishing today, and you would be

nowhere. I was of the opinion that Caesar should not have been continued in the government of Gaul beyond five years. I was also of the opinion that, while he was absent, he should not have been allowed to seek the consulship. If I had been fortunate enough to persuade of one or the other, we would never have fallen into the abyss where we are today. But, when I saw," he continues, "that Pompey had delivered the Republic to Caesar, when I noticed that he was beginning too late to sense the evils that I had foreseen for so long, I did not stop speaking of compromise, and I spared nothing to bring the minds together."³

Pompey having abandoned Italy, Cicero, who, as he says himself, knew well whom he should flee but not whom he should follow, remained there some time longer. Caesar made contact with him and wanted to oblige him, by entreaties and by threats, to take his side. But this republican rejected his proposals with as much contempt as pride. When the party of liberty had been destroyed, he submitted to him along with the entire Universe; he did not offer useless resistance; he did not do as Cato, who abandoned the Republic along with his life in a cowardly way; he saved himself for more fortunate times, and he sought in philosophy consolations that others had found only in death.

He withdrew to Tusculum to seek there the liberty that his country had lost. Those fields were never so gloriously fertile; we owe to them those fine works that have been admired by all the sects and throughout all the revolutions of philosophy.

But, when the conspirators had committed that grand action that astonishes tyrants even today, Cicero emerged as if from the tomb, and that sun, which the star of Julius⁴ had eclipsed, shone with a new light. Brutus, all covered with blood and glory, showing the people the dagger and liberty, exclaimed, "Cicero!" And, whether he was calling him to his aid, or wishing⁵ to congratulate him on the liberty that he had just returned to him, or whether, finally, this new liberator of the country was declaring himself his rival, he bestowed on him in one single word the most magnificent praise that a mortal had ever received.

Cicero immediately joined Brutus; the perils did not faze him in the least. Caesar still lived in the heart of his soldiers; Antony, who was the heir of his ambition, held in his hands consular authority. None of that prevented him from declaring himself, and, by his authority and his example, he determined for a Universe still uncertain whether it ought to regard Brutus as a parricide or as the liberator of the country.

But the liberal gifts that Caesar had made for the Romans through his will were new chains for them. Antony harangued that avaricious people, and, showing it Caesar's bloody robe, he roused it so strongly that it went to set fire

to the conspirators' houses. Brutus and Cassius, constrained to abandon their ungrateful country, had only this means to escape the insults of a population as furious as it was blind.

Antony, having become bolder, usurped in Rome more authority than Caesar himself had done. He seized the public coffers, sold provinces and magistracies, made war on Roman colonies, finally violated all the laws. Proud of the success of his eloquence, he no longer feared Cicero's, he declaimed against him right in the Senate; but he was truly astonished to find still in Rome a Roman.

Soon after, Octavian made that infamous treaty in which Antony, for the price of his friendship, demanded the head of Cicero. Never was war more disastrous to the Republic than this unworthy reconciliation, in which the only victims sacrificed were those who had so gloriously defended it.

The detestable Popilius was in the following manner exonerated, in Seneca, of the death of Cicero: that this so odious crime was the crime of Antony, who had commanded it, not that of Popilius, who had obeyed; that the proscription of Cicero had been to die, that of Popilius to take life from him; that it was not marvelous that he had been forced to kill him, since Cicero, the first of all the Romans, had been constrained to lose his head.⁶

NOTES

1. [Montesquieu's note:] I wrote this discourse in my youth. It can become good, if I remove the air of a panegyric from it. It is necessary, besides that, to give a longer account of Cicero's works, to look especially at the letters, and to go further into the causes of the ruin of the Republic and into the characters of Caesar, Pompey, and Antony.

2. The hero here is Alexander the Great, whose biography Quintus Curtius wrote.

3. As the editor of the Gallimard edition observes (Roger Caillois, Notes in Montesquieu, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, 1581), the quotations in this paragraph are a free translation of *Second Philippic*, sec. 24.

4. [Montesquieu's note:] *Julium Sidus*.

5. [Montesquieu's note:] *Second Philippic*.

6. [Montesquieu's note:] *Seventh Controversy*. [It should read *Seventeenth Controversy*. This point is made by Caillois, Notes in Montesquieu, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, 1581.]