

A DISAPPROVAL OF AN UNREASONABLE USE OF THE DISCIPLINE OF DIALECTIC

Letter to Tommaso Caloria in Messina. Avignon, March 12, ca. 1335. (*Fam.*, I, 7 [6], in *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, I, 35-38; *Opera* [Basel, 1581], pp. 579-80.)

To Tommaso of Messina, against old dialectic cavaliers

IT IS a risky task to contend with an enemy who is not so eager to win as to fight. You tell me of an old dialectician who has been violently annoyed by my letter, as though I had condemned his profession. He is raging in public, you say, and threatens to assail our field of studies in a letter of his; and you have been waiting for this letter in vain for months. Do not expect it any longer. Believe me, it will never come. That much good sense is left in him. He is evidently ashamed of his stylistic capacities, or else his silence is a confession of his ignorance. Those who are implacable with their tongues do not battle with the pen. They do not like to let men know how frail their armor is. They fight after the Parthian manner, while they are fleeing; they cast their volatile words into the air, as if they were committing their darts to the wind.

As I said before, it is risky to fight with such people after their fashion, especially because they so much enjoy the combat itself. They are not set to find the truth—they want the struggle. But there is a Varronian maxim: "In too much altercation truth is lost."¹ Do not be afraid that they will come out to the open battleground of written words and solid discussion. It is of such people that Quintilian has said in his *Instruction of Speech-making*: "You will find certain people miraculously

1. [This maxim is not preserved among the fragments which have come down to us of Varro's work but among excerpts from plays by Publilius Syrus in Macrobius *Saturnalia* ii. 7. 11. Later in his life Petrarca knew that the author was Publilius, whom he calls Publilius because of a corrupt reading in his Macrobius (see p. 97).]

clever in disputing. However, as soon as they must do without this kind of caviling, they are no more efficient in any serious operation than certain animals which are very nimble in narrow straits but easily caught in the open field."² Therefore, they are quite right if they fear to come out. For it is true what the same Quintilian says: "The weak have recourse to crooked ways and evasive tricks, for those who do not achieve much in running away escape adroitly by their flexibility."³

There is one thing, my friend, that I want to tell you: If you aim at virtue and truth, avoid this sort of men. But where can we find refuge from such mad folk if even islands are not safe from them? Not even Scylla and Charybdis prevent this pest from swimming across to Sicily. This kind of misfortune is evidently peculiar to islands, since a horde of new Cyclopes has gathered near Mount Etna, to match the host of dialectic fighters in Britain.⁴ Did I not read in Pomponius Mela's *Cosmography* that Britain resembles Sicily very much?⁵ I believed, it is true, that this resemblance consisted in the geographical situation and the almost triangular shape of the two islands and perhaps also in the ceaseless breaking of the sea against the shores of both. I had not thought of the dialecticians. I had heard that the Cyclopes were the first to live there, then the tyrants, and that both were ferocious people. However, I did not know that a new kind of monster had arrived there, armed with double-edged enthymemes,⁶ a gang more insolent than the wild

2. [*Instituto oratoria* xii. 2. 14.]

3. [*Ibid.* ix. 2. 78.]

4. [Petrarca seems to refer to a recently increasing dialectic tendency among men of philosophical interests in Sicily and places it beside that of contemporary English philosophers.]

5. [Mela *Cosmographia* iii. 50.]

6. [Remembering the "well-rounded enthymeme" from Juvenal's Sixth Satire (vs. 449-50), Petrarca apparently invents a new class of syllogisms with contradicting premises, "enthymemata bisacuta," which are sharpened at both ends.]

breakers on the shore of Taormina. One thing I had not noticed before you brought it to my attention: They shield their sect with the splendid name of Aristotelians and pretend that Aristotle was wont to discuss in their manner. It is a kind of excuse to stick to the footsteps of famous leaders. Marcus Tullius, too, says that "not unwillingly he would commit an error," if necessary, "together with Plato."⁷ But they are mistaken: Aristotle, who was a man of fervent spirits, discussed problems of the highest order and wrote about them. How else would he have managed to write so many volumes that are composed with so much application in so many sleepless nights amid so many other occupations, particularly with his fortunate pupil, and during a life that did not last long? For we hear about him from ancient authors that he died in the ill-famed sixty-third year of his age.⁸ However, why are these people straying so far away from their leader, why are they so eager to be called Aristotelians, why are they not rather ashamed of this name? No greater contrast can be imagined than that between this great philosopher and a man who does not write anything, understands but little, and shouts much and without consequence. Who does not laugh at the insignificant little conclusions in which these highly educated people fatigue themselves and others? They waste their whole lives in such conclusions, since they are not good for anything else and especially destructive in this particular case.

Such syllogisms are very often ridiculed by Cicero and Seneca. Well known also is a repartee which Diogenes made, when a quarrelsome dialectic debater assailed him in the fol-

7. [Cicero *Tusculanae disputationes* i. 17. 40.]

8. [Ancient medical theory considered every seventh and ninth year in the life of an individual as critical, and consequently the sixty-third year as the most critical of all (Firmicus Maternus *Matheseos* iv. 20. 3). On his own sixty-third birthday (July 20, 1367), Petrarca told Boccaccio of the strange feelings with which he began this suspicious year (*Sen.*, VIII, 1), and exactly a year later, in another letter to Boccaccio (*ibid.*, p. 9), he felt relieved because he had passed it without serious trouble.]

lowing manner: "What I am you are not," he began. When Diogenes admitted this statement, he went on: "But I am a man." When Diogenes did not deny this either, the cavalier smuggled in the conclusion: "Thus you are not a man." It was then that Diogenes replied: "This is a wrong conclusion, and if you want it to become right, you must start with me."⁹ Many most ridiculous conclusions are like this one. These people will perhaps know what they intend to achieve by them: whether they hope to win fame or to have a pleasant time or to get counsel on how to lead a decent and happy life. I certainly do not know what they want. To noble minds profit should not appear to be a dignified reward for studies. It fits a craftsman to seek profit; generous arts know a nobler goal.

These friends of dialectic get angry when they hear what I say, for the ceaseless talking of quarrelsome persons is always liable to degenerate into an angry mood. "Thus you disapprove of the discipline of dialectic," they say. Not in the least. I know how much it was appreciated by the Stoics, this strong and masculine sect of philosophers that is so often cited by Cicero, particularly in his book *About the Ultimate Ends*.¹⁰ I know that it is one of the liberal arts and a stepping-stone for those who want to rise to higher grades. It is not a useless weapon in the hands of those who try to find a way through the thickets of philosophy. It sharpens the intellect, marks off the path toward truth, and teaches how to avoid fallacies. If it does not achieve anything else, it certainly gives a man a ready wit and makes him most resourceful. All this I do not deny. But where we pass with honor, we do not stay with praise. A wayfarer who forgets the goal he has set to himself because the road is so pleasant is not sound of mind. A traveler is praised if he completes a long journey quickly without ever stopping before its end. And who among us is not a traveler? All of us must cover

9. [Gellius *Noctes atticae* xviii. 13. 78.]

10. [*De finibus* Books iii-iv.]

(+) or dialectic

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a long and difficult road in a short set time in bad weather, almost as it were on a rainy winter day. Occupation with dialectic may cover a part of this road; it ought never to be the goal. It may be on the morning schedule but never on that of the evening. At one time we were completely right in doing many things that would turn out to be most disgraceful for us if we still did them. If we do not succeed in our old age in leaving the dialectic schools behind us, because we played in them while we were boys, we might just as well not feel ashamed to continue "playing odd and even and using a shaky reed"¹¹ as a hobby horse or to start again rocking in a baby cradle.

~~XX~~ Things are strangely different and times are changing. With most vigilant art Nature has thought out how to prevent man from being bored. Do not believe that such changes happen only within the course of a single year; many more of them will happen during a long life. Spring is charming for its blossoming flowers and trees; summer is rich in all kinds of grain, autumn in fruit, and winter brings abundance of snow. All this is not just tolerable but pleasant and agreeable. If you change one for the other, the laws of Nature will break down and everything becomes hard to bear. Just as no one would endure icy January frost all summer with even temper, or torrid summer heat if it raged in months where it does not belong, everybody without exception would become angry and laugh at an old man who did nothing else than play with little children, and everybody would be amazed at a gray-haired, gouty boy. Can you imagine anything, I ask you, that is so useful or even so necessary as the first notion of letters? They are the foundation on which all our studies rest. However, vice versa, is there anything so ridiculous as an old man who is still occupied with these elements? Therefore, stir up the pupils of that old man, quoting my words: Do not deter them, rather encourage them, not indeed to throw themselves in all haste into the study of dialectic, but to pass

11. [Horace *Satires* ii. 3. 247.]

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quickly through this discipline to better ones. And tell your old man that I do not condemn the liberal arts, but childish old people. For as there is nothing more disgraceful than "an old man in a first-grade class," as Seneca says,¹² so there is nothing so ugly as an old man who is a dialectic debater. And if he starts to spit out syllogisms, this is my advice: Run away and let him dispute with Encheladus.¹³

Farewell.

Avignon, March 12.

12. [*Epistle* 36. 4.]

13. [The ferocious giant of the ancient myth whom Jupiter buried under the flaming masses of Mount Etna (cf. Virgil *Aeneid* iii. 595) is so to say a neighbor of the old man in Messina.]

→ syllogisms = form of arg. or reasoning
2 statements & a 3rd
drawn necessarily from them

"All trees have roots; an oak is a tree;
therefore, an oak has roots."