CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BRUTUS: THE HISTORY OF ROMAN ELOQUENCE

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Composition, setting, and dialogue form

Brutus marks Cicero’s return to literary activity after the civil war; the composition of the work was probably completed in the spring of 46 B.C., before Cato’s suicide in Africa. Cicero proposes to reconstruct the history of Roman eloquence by means of a dialogue set in his Roman house, with himself and his friends Brutus and Atticus acting as interlocutors.

Brutus, which opens with a tribute to the great orator Hortensius, now dead a few years, has from its beginning a funereal tone; the history of eloquence is also presented as a sort of ‘epitaph’ of Republican oratory. Cicero emphasizes that, following the civil war, the forum is practically deserted (6): many of the better orators have disappeared, either as a result of the conflict or because of the inexorable necessity of nature. The few remaining have been reduced to silence, since the dominion of Caesar has meant the extinction of all free political debate; the remaining patroni in the field are incompetent parvenus, having emerged thanks to their recent social climbing and self-interested loyalty to the dictator (157). But the ‘death of eloquence’ that Brutus so often laments also has causes less incidental: in recent decades, the crisis of the Republic and the ever more dominant role of the armies of the great potentates had progressively

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relegated to a secondary level the word as an instrument of persuasion and of political mediation.

Unlike De oratore, Brutus is rather lacking in details of scene-painting; there are only a couple: the portico in which Cicero strolls when he receives the visit of his friends (10) and the garden decorated with a statue of Plato, near which they sit to converse in leisurely fashion (24). In spite of this explicit reference to Plato, Brutus proceeds in its development in a manner more akin to the 'Aristotelian' form of dialogue: rather than a close encounter between three characters marked by lively interaction, Cicero prefers a continuous exposition, wherein the treatment that he unfolds is interrupted only rarely by the brief interventions of the other interlocutors. Characterization of the latter, particularly that of Brutus, does not appear especially respectful of historical reality: it is improbable, in particular, that Brutus, whose opinions about eloquence were markedly different from those of Cicero (cf. below, 408, 428), would have accepted him in the role of intellectual guide that Cicero assigns himself in the literary fiction.

Nevertheless, the conversation does not lack vivacity, and the protagonist's interlocutors are not mere puppets devoid of life; the principal value of Brutus' literary form consists in its capacity to render, in a manner that is lively and rich in effects, the atmosphere of an intellectual milieu that knows how to preserve the passion for research and debate, while under the oppressive mantle of a dictatorship. One might say, rather, that such a passion has been nourished precisely by the crisis of the Republic. The commemoration of eloquence presented in the dialogue is also that of an entire period of Roman history in which politics and persuasion prevailed over the force of arms. Through their taste for antiquarian research, the characters express a pietas that is charged with nostalgia for a tradition that they warn is quickly dying away.

Sources and method

The genesis of Brutus is best understood against the background of the contemporary blossoming of investigations into history and national traditions; but in the dialogue, antiquarian research attains the dignity of a broad historical-literary synthesis. A work like Brutus does not easily allow itself to be located in any of the critical genres that