CHAPTER SIX

CICERO’S ROMAN EXILE

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To say that exile is a state of absence, and in particular of the loss of one’s homeland, may seem obvious. But it is worth repeating if only because, in Roman eyes, discussion of exile always includes as its unspoken counterpart some comment on the patria. This paper will examine the relationship of exilium and patria by considering how Roman understandings of exile might change when something is wrong with the patria. In what follows I will argue that, in writings produced during Caesar’s dictatorship, Cicero uses exilic paradoxes to comment on the res publica and to define his own position in the newly-established autocracy.

I will begin with a brief discussion of Cicero’s attitude toward his own exile, his behavior during the war between Caesar and Pompey, and his return to Rome in 47 BCE. The bulk of the paper, however, will focus on a set of works produced by Cicero after his return to Rome, in which he addresses both the state of the res publica and his proper role within it: first, a section of the Paradoxa Stoicorum, a philosophical work produced at the beginning of 46 BCE, and second a set of letters written in the same year to Marcus Marcellus, the consul of 51 BCE, then living in exile in Mytilene.1 I will argue that in both these texts Cicero builds on the rhetoric he developed to refashion his own exile in order to address the problems he and other Roman politicians faced under Caesar’s dictatorship.

Cicero’s attachment to the city of Rome is justly famous. In addition to the homesickness seen in the letters he wrote from exile, we have this passage of a letter written in June 50 BCE to Caelius Rufus (Fam. 2.12.2):

urbe, urbe, mi Rufe, cole et in ista luce vive; omnis peregrinatio, quod ego ab adolescentia iudicavi, obscura et sordida est iis quorum industria Romae potest industris esse.

1 Tullia’s death in February of 45 BCE marks a change in Cicero’s obsessions from the political to the private.
The city, my Rufus, dwell in the city and live in that brightness; every absence, as I determined in my youth, is obscure and worthless for those whose talent can be brought to light in Rome.

He writes this not from exile but as the proconsular governor of Cilicia, an honorable and even desirable part of any political career. Although proud of the job he did there, Cicero was determined to return to Rome as soon as he could. Not only was Rome, as he claims here, the only proper locale for human achievement, it was also the only place where he might influence the crisis in the Republic. Even on the verge of civil war, when there may have been good reasons to leave the city, Cicero’s devotion to the site of Rome remained unshaken. When Pompey announced that he intended to abandon the city to Caesar’s approaching forces in January of 49 BCE, Cicero imagined the following exchange (Att. 7.11.3, written mid-January 49 BCE):

“urbem tu relinquas? ergo idem, si Galli venirent?” “non est”, inquit, “in parietibus res publica.” “at in aris et focis.”

“Are you leaving the city? Would you have done the same if the Gauls were coming?” He answers, “The state is not in the house-walls.” “But it is in the altars and hearthstones.”

The reference to altars and hearths is not accidental: the sacred sites within the city were integral to Roman identity, and without them it was not clear what kind of state Rome might be.

In light of this attitude, Cicero’s own exile is often seen as a deeply traumatic event for him, so much so that authors attempt to apply modern psychological terminology based on the letters he wrote during this period. Many commentators find the apparent glimpses into Cicero’s emotional state disturbing or disappointing, although Hutchinson’s re-evaluation of these letters as “forceful and articulate pieces of writing”, provides a welcome contrast. Upon his return to

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2 As Fuhrmann (1990) 123 writes, “from the outset, Cicero regarded the governorship which had been imposed on him as an onerous duty and he was anxiously concerned that it should last no longer than the year which the Senate had ordained. An unusually large number of letters have been preserved from the year and a half of his absence from Rome... In all these letters no theme recurs as frequently as the wish, the request, the admonition to the recipient that he should do everything in his power to ensure that the governorship was not extended”. See also p. 14 n. 74 above.


4 Rawson (1983) 118 describes him as “very near a nervous breakdown”.