From *Of Oratory*

**In Three Books Addressed to His Brother Quintus**

**BOOK I**

*Introduction. The author's circumstances.*

I. When, as often happens, brother Quintus, I think over and recall the days of old, those men always seem to me to have been singularly happy who, with the State at her best, and while enjoying high distinctions and the fame of their achievements, were able to maintain such a course of life that they could either engage in activity that involved no risk or enjoy a dignified repose. And time was when I used to imagine that I too should become entitled, with wellnigh universal approval, to some opportunity of leisure and of again directing my mind to the sublime pursuits beloved of us both, when once, the career of office complete and life too taking the turn towards its close, the endless toil of public speaking and the business of canvassing should have come to a standstill. The hopes so born of my thoughts and plans have been cheated, alike by the disastrous times of public peril and by my manifold personal misfortunes. For the time of life which promised to be fullest of quiet and peace proved to be that during which the greatest volume of vexations and the most turbulent tempests arose. And notwithstanding my desire, and indeed my profound longing, no enjoyment of leisure was granted me, for the cultivation and renewed pursuit, in your company, of those arts to which from boyhood you and I have been devoted. For in my early years I came just upon the days when the old order was overthrown; then by my consulship I was drawn into the midst of a universal struggle and crisis, and my whole time ever since that consulship I have spent in stemming those billows which, stayed by my efforts from ruining the nation, rolled in a flood upon myself. But none the less, though events are thus harassing and my time so restricted, I will hearken to the call of our studies, and every moment of leisure allowed me by the perfidy of my enemies, the advocacy of my friends and my political duties, I will dedicate first and foremost to writing. And when you, brother, exhort and request me, I will not fail you, for no man's authority or wish can have greater weight with me than yours.

*Education of the orator.*

II. And now I must bring back to mind the recollection of an old story, not, I admit, as clear in detail as it might be, but, to my thinking, suited to what you ask; so that you may learn what men renowned above all others for eloquence have thought about the whole subject of oratory. For it is your wish, as you have often told me, that — since the unfinished and crude essays, which slipped out of the notebooks of my boyhood, or rather of my youth, are hardly worthy of my present time of life and of my experience gained from the numerous and grave causes in which I have been engaged — I should publish something more polished and complete on these same topics; and generally you disagree with me, in our occasional discussions of this subject, because I hold that eloquence is dependent upon the trained skill of highly educated men, while you consider that it must be separated from the refinements of learning and made to depend on a sort of natural talent and on practice.

*Great orators — why rare.*

And for my own part, when, as has often happened, I have been contemplating men of the highest eminence and endowed with the highest

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Books I and II translated by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham; Book III translated by H. Rackham.

1The metaphors are borrowed from the Circus. *Decursu honorum = decursis honoribus*: Cicero had been successively augur, quaestor, aedile, praetor, consul, and proconsul. [Trs.]

2Cicero was about eighteen years old at the outbreak of the civil strife between Marius and Sulla. [Trs.]

3The reference is to the juvenile *De Inventione* of Cicero, in two books. [Trs.]
abilities, it has seemed to me to be a matter for inquiry, why it was that more of them should have gained outstanding renown in all other pursuits, than have done so in oratory. For in whatever direction you turn your mind and thoughts, you will find very many excelling in every kind, not merely of ordinary arts, but of such as are almost the greatest. Who, for instance, in seeking to measure the understanding possessed by illustrious men, whether by the usefulness or the grandeur of their achievements, would not place the general above the orator? Yet who could doubt that, from this country alone, we could cite almost innumerable examples of leaders in war of the greatest distinction, but of men excelling in oratory a mere handful? Nay further, among the men who by their counsel and wisdom could control and direct the helm of state, many have stood out in our own day, and still more in the history of our fathers and even of our remoter ancestors, and yet through lengthy ages no good orator is to be found, and in each successive generation hardly a single tolerable one. And that no one may think that other pursuits, which have to do with abstruse branches of study, and what I may call the varied field of learning, should be compared with this art of oratory, rather than the merits of a commander or the wisdom of a statesman-like senator, let him turn his attention to these very kinds of art, and look around to see who, and how many, have been distinguished therein; in this way he will most readily judge how scarce orators are now, and ever have been.

Eminence in all fields rare.

III. For indeed you cannot fail to remember that the most learned men hold what the Greeks call "philosophy" to be the creator and mother, as it were, of all the reputable arts, and yet in this field of philosophy it is difficult to count how many men there have been, eminent for their learning and for the variety and extent of their studies, men whose efforts were devoted, not to one separate branch of study, but who have mastered everything they could whether by scientific investigation or by the methods of dialectic. Who does not know, as regards the so-called mathematicians, what very obscure subjects, and how abstruse, manifold, and exact an art they are engaged in? Yet in this pursuit so many men have displayed outstanding excellence, that hardly one seems to have worked in real earnest at this branch of knowledge without attaining the object of his desire. Who has devoted himself wholly to the cult of the Muses, or to this study of literature, which is professed by those who are known as men of letters, without bringing within the compass of his knowledge and observation the almost boundless range and subject matter of those arts?

I think I shall be right in affirming this, that out of all those who have been engaged in the infinitely copious studies and learning pertaining to these arts, the smallest number of distinguished men is found among poets and orators; and even in this small number — within which a man of excellence very rarely emerges — if you will make a careful comparison of our own national supply and that of Greece, far fewer good orators will be found even than good poets. And this should seem even more marvellous because the subjects of the other arts are derived as a rule from hidden and remote sources, while the whole art of oratory lies open to the view, and is concerned in some measure with the common practice, custom, and speech of mankind, so that, whereas in all other arts that is most excellent which is farthest removed from the understanding and mental capacity of the untrained, in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday life, and the usage approved by the sense of the community.

Oratory an attractive but difficult study.

IV. And yet it cannot truly be said either that more men devote themselves to the other arts, or that those who do so are stimulated to close study by greater pleasure, higher hopes, or more splendid rewards. In fact, to say nothing of Greece, which has ever claimed the leading part in eloquence, and of Athens, that discoverer of all learning, where the supreme power of oratory was both invented and perfected, in this city of our own assuredly no studies have ever had a more vigorous life than those having to do with the art of speaking.
For as soon as our world-empire had been established, and an enduring peace had assured us leisure, there was hardly a youth, athirst for fame, who did not deem it his duty to strive with might and main after eloquence. At first indeed, in their complete ignorance of method, since they thought there was no definite course of training or any rules of art, they used to attain what skill they could by means of their natural ability and of reflection. But later, having heard the Greek orators, gained acquaintance with their literature and called in Greek teachers, our people were fired with a really incredible enthusiasm for eloquence. The importance, variety, and frequency of current suits of all sorts aroused them so effectually, that, to the learning which each man had acquired by his own efforts, plenty of practice was added, as being better than the maxims of all the masters. In those days too, as at present, the prizes open to this study were supreme, in the way of popularity, wealth, and reputation alike. As for ability again — there are many things to show it — our fellow-countrymen have far excelled the men of every other race. And considering all this, who would not rightly marvel that, in all the long record of ages, times, and states, so small a number of orators is to be found?

But the truth is that this oratory is a greater thing, and has its sources in more arts and branches of study, than people suppose.

Its wide demands on the student;

V. For, where the number of students is very great, the supply of masters of the very best, the quality of natural ability outstanding, the variety of issues unlimited, the prizes open to eloquence exceedingly splendid, what else could anyone think to be the cause, unless it be the really incredible vastness and difficulty of the subject? To begin with, a knowledge of very many matters must be grasped, without which oratory is but an empty and ridiculous swirl of verbiage; and the distinctive style has to be formed, not only by the choice of words, but also by the arrangement of the same; and all the mental emotions, with which nature has endowed the human race, are to be intimately understood, because it is in calming or kindling the feelings of the audience that the full power and science of oratory are to be brought into play. To this there should be added a certain humor, flashes of wit, the culture befitting a gentleman, and readiness and terseness alike in repelling and in delivering the attack, the whole being combined with a delicate charm and urbanity. Further, the complete history of the past and a store of precedents must be retained in the memory, nor may a knowledge of statute law and our national law in general be omitted. And why should I go on to describe the speaker's delivery? That needs to be controlled by bodily carriage, gesture, play of features and changing intonation of voice; and how important that is wholly by itself, the actor's trivial art and the stage proclaim; for there, although all are laboring to regulate the expression, the voice, and the movements of the body, everyone knows how few actors there are, or ever have been, whom we could bear to watch! What need to speak of that universal treasure-house the memory? Unless this faculty be placed in charge of the ideas and phrases which have been thought out and well weighed, even though as conceived by the orator they were of the highest excellence, we know that they will all be wasted.

Let us therefore cease to wonder what may be the cause of the rarity of orators, since oratory is the result of a whole number of things, in any one of which to succeed is a great achievement, and let us rather exhort our children, and the others whose fame and repute are dear to us, to form a true understanding of the greatness of their task, and not to believe that they can gain their coveted object by reliance on the rules or methods of practice employed by everybody, but to rest assured that they can do this by the help of certain other means.

VI. And indeed in my opinion, no man can be an orator complete in all points of merit, who has not attained a knowledge of all important subjects and arts. For it is from knowledge that
oratory must derive its beauty and fullness, and unless there is such knowledge, well-grasped and comprehended by the speaker, there must be something empty and almost childish in the utterance. Not that I am going to lay so heavy a burden upon orators — least of all upon our own, amid all the distractions of life in Rome — as to hold that there is nothing of which it is permissible for them to be ignorant, although the significance of the term "orator," and the mere act of professing eloquence, seem to undertake and to promise that every subject whatsoever, proposed to an orator, will be treated by him with both distinction and knowledge. But being assured that to most men this appears a vast and indeed limitless enterprise, and perceiving that the Greeks, men not only abounding in genius and learning, but also amply endowed with leisure and the love of study, have already made a sort of division of the arts — nor did every student of theirs work over the whole field by himself, but they separated from other uses of speech that portion of oratory which is concerned with the public discussions of the law courts and of debate, and left that branch only to the orator — I shall not include in this work more than has been assigned to this type of oratory by the all but unanimous judgment of the most eminent men, after investigation and long argument of the matter;

Dialogue form appropriate for the present subject.

nor shall I recall, from the cradle of our boyish learning of days gone by, a long string of precepts, but I shall repeat the things I heard of as once handled in a discussion between men who were the most eloquent of our nation, and of the highest rank in distinction of every kind. Not that I despise what the Greek craftsmen and teachers of oratory have left us; but that is open to the view and ready to the hand of every man, nor could it be more happily set forth or more clearly expounded by any interpretations of my own, so that you will forgive me, brother mine, I do believe, if I prefer to Greek instruction the authoritative judgment of those to whom the highest honors in eloquence have been awarded by our own fellow-countrymen.