

Nosti Morem Dialogorum: Cicero, Varro, and the Dialogic Doublespeak
of the Late Republic

The years from 46 to 44 BCE were some of Cicero's most literarily prolific, and certainly his most literarily complex. From 45 to 44 in particular, as Cicero plays rapidly and repeatedly with the form and structure of his "dialogic voice," we see evidence that he did not only imagine the dialogue form to be his future legacy, but that he believed that it had within it the power to save, and perhaps eventually rebuild, a rapidly failing Republic. This paper focuses on the peculiar set of private letters to Atticus (*Ep. Att.* 13.12 – 16; 18 – 25; 33a; 36; 34; and 48) and to Varro (*Ep. Fam.* 9.2 – 8).

I begin with the letters to Atticus of 45 BCE. In these letters, we learn first that Varro has announced his intention to give a "great and weighty dedication" to Cicero (*Ep. Att.* 13.12.2), and then witness a somewhat frantic Cicero scrabbling around—apparently at Atticus' firm recommendation (*Ep. Att.* 13.13.1)—to produce a suitable, and suitably timely, counter-dedication of some substance (a dedication realized in the now-fragmentary *Academica*). Although it has elsewhere been argued that these letters are evidence of a degree of personal tension between the two, in this paper I argue that we see rather a Cicero who recognizes in Varro a crucial literary and intellectual ally in the final years of the Republic, and who sought to entice him to join his dialogic project.

I turn next to the letters to Varro of 46 and 45 BCE, and most specifically the last of these letters—9.8—which effectively serves as the epistolary introduction of Cicero's *Academica*. It is in this letter that we witness Cicero speak perhaps most frankly of his dialogic project and the "way of the dialogue," informing Varro that he should not be alarmed to read himself speaking in a dialogue that never occurred. But as we know

from *Brutus* (42), the “way of the dialogue” involves not merely presenting as if factual entirely fictitious conversations. Rather, it engages in a coded doublespeak through which a select audience of informed readers may communicate more freely and, if possible, use such texts to engage in significant—and salutary—political action (*una vivere in studiis nostris, a quibus antea delectationem modo petebamus, nunc vero etiam salutem; non deesse, si quis adhibere volet, non modo ut architectos, verum etiam ut fabros, ad aedificandam rem publicam*).

The final part of the paper looks briefly to the opening sections of the *Academica*.,. In these sections, the character of “Cicero” accuses the character of “Varro” of writing something which he has “kept in hiding” (*...nec tamen istum cessare sed celare quae scribat existimo, Acad. 1.1*), a charge to which “Varro” responds that to write what one would wish to hide is the work of fools (*intemperantis enim arbitror esse scribere quod occultari uelit*). And here it is, of course, that Cicero tips his hand, letting his readers, and of course his dedicatee, know precisely that much of what he has written, and will continue to write, “hides” internal meaning and political message. And, as “Cicero” urges “Varro” to write political dialogues himself (and as “Varro” politely declines) we see not only Cicero’s hopes for a grand dialogic empire but also, perhaps, the impetus behind Varro’s last known work: the dialogic, and hauntingly dystopian, *de Rebus Rusticis*.