

## *Dolore impeditus*: Blindness as a Symptom of Grief in Cicero's Letters

Grief, like love, anger, and hatred, is an emotion that has the power to overwhelm. Cicero, writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., considered grief as “*genus aegritudinis, quod unum est omnium maximum* (*Tusc.*, 3.81).” In my paper I argue that after the death of his daughter, Tullia, Cicero's particular kind of sickness in his grief is that of blindness. Cicero loses the ability to perceive himself and the world around him. More importantly, others recognize Cicero's lack of sight. I will examine Servius Sulpicius Rufus and then Lucius Luceius' consolations to Cicero on the death of his daughter (*Fam.* 4.5, 5.14). Both letters stress that Cicero's inability to see is preventing him from moving on from his grief. We are fortunate to have Cicero's responses to both of these letters (*Fam.* 4.6, 5.15) and consolations written to others from himself (e.g. *Ad Brut.* 1.9). A survey of Cicero's replies and how he constructs his own consolations will provide further conclusions concerning the importance of sight to Cicero.

Servius Sulpicius Rufus in his celebrated letter of consolation (*Fam.* 4.5) justifies writing his thoughts to Cicero “*quod forsitan dolore impeditus minus ea perspicias* (*Fam.* 4.5.1).” Sulpicius initially uses traditional rhetorical and philosophical *topoi* to try to console Cicero (Hutchinson, 1998). For example the use of *exempla* of other historical figures who have experienced the same sorrows and overcome them is a common *topos* in consolatory literature. Sulpicius, though, takes a different approach to this convention and uses his own experience with grief instead of using historical figures as an example to follow. This passage is a biographical account of Sulpicius' self-realization of the nature of fortune. He recounts: *Ex Asia rediens cum ab Aegina Megaram versus navigarem, coepi regiones circumcirca prospicere. Post me erat Aegina, ante me Megara, dextra Piraeus, sinistra Corinthus, quae oppida quodam tempore florentissima fuerunt, nunc prostrata et diruta ante oculos iacent* (*Fam.* 4.5.4). Sulpicius, by

finally looking around (*prospicere*) at what was thrown before his eyes (*ante oculos iacent*), was able to remember his place in the world around him, which allowed him to move past his grief. The unwritten motivation behind this statement is a challenge to Cicero to see if he can master his grief as well, if not better, than Sulpicius has (Wilcox, 2005). The implications are that Sulpicius knows that Cicero is blinded by his grief, but Sulpicius can still see him. When sight is only in one direction, the seeing person has a distinct advantage over the unseeing one.

This concern over others' perception of the one grieving is also prevalent in Lucius Luceius' consolation to Cicero (*Fam.* 5.14). Luceius has cause to write because he is surprised that he has not seen Cicero in Rome. He would understand if Cicero needed solitude to work on his writing, but he is not sympathetic if Cicero is still absent because he is mourning excessively. In a more chiding tone than Sulpicius, Luceius writes: "*tu solus aperta non videbis, qui propter acumen occultissima perspicis (*Fam.* 5.14.2)?" According to Luceius, Cicero is normally able to perceive even the most hidden things (*occultissima*). In his grief, however, Cicero is blind to his own self-perception and thus to a possible way out from his sorrows.*

As Sulpicius and Luceius imply, this blindness is dangerous not only because Cicero has lost sight of who he is, but also because others can still see him in his grief. Sight and seeing are reciprocal actions and as much as Cicero believes that he is in solitude alone in the woods with his books and writing (*Att.* 12.15), he is still on view in a tenuous political climate. His reputation and standing amongst his peers is at stake; as he and his friends struggle to cope with the shifting political landscape, now under the control of one man, namely Caesar (*Fam.* 4.6), his former ability to see even what others cannot is still needed.

### Works Cited

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