

Q2. Discuss:

nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.

Not to know what happened before you were born is to be forever a child.

Cicero, *Orator* 34.120

The sentiment expressed by Cicero implies a craving for knowledge which was prevalent in the culture of the late Roman republic, and whilst it may have differing interpretations, based on the existing portrayal of Cicero, it is most likely intended as a warning on remaining uneducated. This view is mirrored by historians and historiographers, perhaps not with the same ferocity, who devote their lives to developing a knowledge of the past, and hence surely perceive it to be of significant importance. However, the prominent features of the past within literature, suggests that this need for a deeper historical knowledge is far more widespread than solely a handful of the educated elite.

The fundamentals of this view come down to a choice between knowledge and ignorance, with Cicero firmly standing with the former. The latter he associates with naivety and a lack of maturity, such as the connotations through the use of “child”. Perhaps a less cynical approach, would take from “child” a sense of wonder, not yet stripped away by the horrors of the past, and while there is certainly merit in such a perspective, with an idea of Cicero’s nature and the context which he most likely spoke this in, it is unlikely to be the message he had intended. Cicero’s orations to the Senate, had political agendas, and called regularly on past events to make his case, in his second Philippic also stating that “it is not only discovering the facts but remembering them which ought to stir your spirits”, which reflects the great esteem which he held past events in. Within literature the idea of knowledge is a recurring theme, from the time of the great Grecian tragedians down to 21st century writers, however it is not only presented in such a positive light. Christopher Marlowe’s “Dr Faustus” for instance is a man renowned for his comprehensive intellect, not only of the past but of the world around him. However, Marlowe suggests the corrupting power that an insatiable need for bettering oneself can have, through his descent into madness and tragic end. Whilst this certainly present a view on the dangers which go hand in hand with ambition, it is not necessarily going against the quote as presented by Cicero, not criticising the value of knowledge implicitly but rather the manic obsession for improvement which is a prominent part of the human psyche.

Additionally, knowledge, and the restriction of it, has become a significant trope of the dystopian genre, seen in works such as ‘Fahrenheit 451’ and George Orwell’s ‘1984’. The latter is but one example of the restriction of knowledge and history being used to incapacitate the masses. No clear account of past events is given, nor any contemporary ones for that matter, leaving the people within the regime which Orwell establishes, isolated and wholly dependent on the totalitarian dictator, just as a child is dependent on a parental figure. Of course, this restriction of knowledge that is apparent within dystopian literature, comes first from historic precedent. The dictatorship of North Korea demonstrates the autonomy which is taken from individuals once they become dependent upon a state as their only source of information. The presentation of knowledge within literature is closely comparative to that of Cicero’s presentation, reinforcing the idea that without access to knowledge of what came before you, you are less free. Remaining within the realm of literature, but shifting slightly to literary theory, a more metaphorical reading of this quotation could perhaps compare it with the use of an unstable narrative within literature. The opening of a book ‘in media res’ leaves the

reader with “no idea what happened before [they were born]”, (here ‘born’ being taken as before the book began) and as such far more uncertain and in many cases disorientated by the events which unfold. This shares the same naivety as a child would have, but the lack of knowledge that Cicero discusses is far more permanent than that of an uncertain narrative, which in the overwhelming majority of cases reveals the necessary information, just simply over a prolonged period to stretch the tension across the duration of the book.

Keats’ theory of ‘negative capability’ perhaps sits in opposition with the necessity which Cicero places on knowledge, believing that certain matters do not need an understanding behind them, rather it is more fitting to just appreciate things at face value. His fascination with nature, as was not uncommon among the Romantics, led him to use the transient beauty of the pastoral to be the perfect example of this. This philosophy encouraged him to not question how the leaves grew upon the trees, or why, or how long they would last, but to simply acknowledge their beauty in the present moment. He clearly lacked the same drive for knowledge which Cicero had, readily accepting ignorance in matters which he knew he could never fully obtain a whole truth. However, the scenarios are not the same to wholly compare the two approaches. Keats is not demeaning the importance of understanding about the past altogether, just simply wishing for it not to detract from the beauty of the present. In the final of his odes, ‘To Autumn’, in reference to the natural beauty of the spring, he urges one to “think not of them”, but rather to experience ‘Autumn’ at its fullest. This then allows both approaches to still hold true, since Cicero makes no claim for the past to be considered superior to the present, just warns on the dangers of an ignorant approach to the former.

The importance of knowledge is obvious; from its prominent position as a concept within literature, philosophy and religion. Cicero perhaps expresses this in a hyperbolic manner, which is to be expected of public oration, but the sentiment which he expresses is clearly justified. The restriction of knowledge as a trope within dystopia reflects the fear which an absence of the past elicits among the popular body, and the continued academic pursuit of history reflects not only the interest, but the need for an understanding of the matters of our past. The outcome of this as Cicero describes is “to be forever a child”, simultaneously conveying the corrupting effect which the atrocities of the past can have, yet making clear the necessity for the knowledge of these horrors, if society is ever to ‘grow up’ beyond the errors of our past.