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Excerpt

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*Satyre, tu ne le connois pas. Voy. note, pag. 31.* Ch. Baquay Sculp.

*Satyr, you do not know it; see note p. 16.*

DISCOURSE

that won the prize

OF THE ACADEMY

OF DIJON

In the year 1750

On this Question proposed by the Academy:

*Whether the restoration of the Sciences and the  
Arts has contributed to the purification of morals*

By a Citizen of Geneva

*Here I am the barbarian because  
they do not understand me. Ovid*

GENEVA

Barillot & Son

[OC III 3]

## PREFACE

[1] *Here is one of the great and of the finest questions ever raised. This Discourse is not concerned with the metaphysical subtleties that have spread to all departments of Literature, and of which the Programs of Academies are not always free; it is concerned, rather, with one of the truths that affect the happiness of mankind.*

[2] *I expect I shall not easily be forgiven for the side I have dared to take. Clashing head on with all that is today admired by men, I can only expect universal blame: and it is not for having been honored by the approbation of a few Wise men, that I should expect the approbation of the Public: Thus I have chosen my side; I do not care whether I please Wits or the Fashionable. There will always be men destined to be subjugated by the opinions of their century, their Country, their Society: Some men today act the part of the Freethinker and the Philosopher who, for the same reason, would have been but fanatics at the time of the League. One ought not to write for such Readers when one wants to live beyond one's century.*

[3] *One word more, and I have done. Little expecting the honor bestowed on me, I had, after sending off this Discourse, recast and expanded it to the point of making it, as it were, into another Work; I believed myself obliged to restore it today to the state in which it was awarded the prize. I have only thrown in some notes and let stand two easily recognized additions of which the Academy might perhaps not have approved. I thought that equity, respect, and gratitude required this notice of me.*

## DISCOURSE

[5]

*Decipimur specie recti.*

[4] Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts contributed to the purification of Morals, or to their corruption? This is what has to be examined. Which side ought I to take in this question? The side, Gentlemen, which becomes an honest man who knows nothing and esteems himself no less for it.

[5] I am sensible to the difficulty of making what I have to say conform to the Tribunal before which I appear. How shall I dare to blame the Sciences before one of Europe's most learned Associations, praise ignorance in a famous Academy, and reconcile contempt for study with respect for the truly Learned? I have seen these contradictions; and they have not deterred me. It is not, so I have told myself, Science I abuse; it is Virtue I defend before virtuous men. Probity is even dearer to Good Men than erudition is to the Learned. What, then, have I to fear? The enlightenment of the Assembly listening to me? I acknowledge it; but only with regard to the composition of the discourse, not to the Speaker's sentiment. Equitable Sovereigns have never hesitated to pass judgment against themselves in debates of doubtful issue; and the most advantageous position in a just cause is to have to defend oneself against a Party of integrity and enlightenment judging in his own case.

[6] To this motive which emboldens me is joined another which decides me: namely that, in upholding the side of truth by my natural light; regardless of how successful I may be, there is one Prize that cannot escape me: I will find it in the depths of my heart.

## PART I

[6]

[7] It is a grand and a fine spectacle to see man go forth as it were out of nothing by his own efforts; to dispel by the lights of his reason the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; to raise himself above himself; to soar by the mind to the celestial realms; like to the Sun, to traverse the vast expanse of the Universe with Giant strides; and, what is grander and more difficult still, to return into himself, there to study man and to know his nature, his duties, and his end. All these wonders have occurred anew in the past few Generations.

[8] Europe had relapsed into the Barbarism of the first ages. A few centuries ago the Peoples of this Part of the World, which is today so enlightened, lived in a state worse than ignorance. I know not what scientific jargon more contemptible still than ignorance had usurped the name of knowledge, and stood as an almost invincible obstacle in the path of its return. A revolution was required to return men to common sense; it finally came from the quarter from which it was least to be expected. The stupid Muslim, the eternal scourge of Letters, caused them to be reborn among us. The fall of the Throne of Constantine carried the wreckage of ancient Greece into Italy. France, in turn, was enriched by these precious spoils. Soon the sciences followed Letters; the Art of writing was joined by the Art of thinking; a sequence which appears strange but is perhaps only too natural; and the major advantage of commerce with the muses began to be felt, namely of rendering men more sociable by inspiring in them the desire to please one another with works worthy of their mutual approbation.

[9] The mind has its needs, as has the body. The latter make up the foundations of society, the former make for its being agreeable. While the Government and the Laws see to the [7] safety and the well-being of men assembled, the Sciences, Letters, and Arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they are laden, throttle in them the sentiment of that original freedom for which they seemed born, make them love their slavery, and fashion them into what is called civilized Peoples. Need raised up Thrones; the Sciences

*Part 1*

and Arts have consolidated them. Earthly Powers, love talents and protect those who cultivate them!\* Civilized peoples [*peuples policés*], cultivate them! Happy slaves, you owe to them the delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; the sweet character and urbane morals which make for such engaging and easy relations among you; in a word, the appearances of all the virtues without having a single one of them.

[10] This is the kind of politeness, the more endearing as it affects to show itself less, that formerly distinguished Athens and Rome in the much vaunted days of their magnificence and splendor: it is, no doubt, by it that our century and our Nation will surpass all times and all Peoples. A philosophic tone devoid of pedantry, manners natural yet engaging, as far removed from Teutonic rusticity as from Transalpine Pantomime: These are the fruits of the tastes acquired by a good education and perfected in dealings in the World.

[11] How sweet it would be to live among us if the outward countenance were always the image of the heart's dispositions; if our maxims were our rules; if genuine Philosophy were inseparable from the title of Philosopher! But so many qualities [8] all too seldom go together, and virtue hardly goes forth with so much pomp. Rich apparel may herald a man of wealth and its elegance a man of taste; the healthy and robust man is recognized by other signs: strength and vigor of body will be found under the rustic habit of a Farmer, and not under the gilding of a Courtier. Apparel is no less alien to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul. The good man is an Athlete who delights in fighting naked: he despises all those vile ornaments that would hinder his use of his strength, and most of which were invented only to conceal some deformity.

\* Princes always view with pleasure the dissemination among their subjects of a taste for the agreeable Arts and for superfluities that do not entail exporting monies. For besides thus nurturing in them that pettiness of soul so suited to servitude, they well know that all the needs which a People imposes on itself are so many chains which it assumes. Alexander, wishing to keep the Ichthyophagi dependent on him, compelled them to give up fishing and to eat the foods common to other Peoples; and the Savages of America who go about altogether naked and live entirely off the products of their hunt have proved impossible to tame. Indeed, what yoke could be imposed on men who need nothing?

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*First Discourse*

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[12] Before art had fashioned our manners and taught our Passions to speak in ready-made terms, our morals were rustic but natural, and differences in conduct conveyed differences in character at first sight. Human nature was, at bottom, no better, but men found their security in how easily they saw through one another, and this advantage, to the value of which we are no longer sensitive, spared them a good many vices.

[13] Today, when more subtle inquiries and a more refined taste have reduced the Art of pleasing to principles, a vile and deceiving uniformity prevails in our morals, all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold: constantly civility requires, propriety commands: constantly one follows custom, never one's own genius. One no longer dares to appear what one is; under this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd that is called society will, when placed in similar circumstances, all act in similar ways unless more powerful motives incline them differently. One will therefore never really know with whom one is dealing: in order to know one's friend one will therefore have to wait for great occasions, that is, to wait until it is too late, since it is for these very occasions that it would have been essential to know him.

[14] What a train of vices must attend upon such uncertainty. No more sincere friendships, no more real esteem; no more well-founded trust. Suspensions, offenses, fears, coolness, reserve, hatred, betrayal, will constantly hide behind this even and deceitful veil of politeness, beneath this so much vaunted urbanity, which we [9] owe to the enlightenment of our century. One will no longer profane the name of the Lord of the Universe with oaths, but insult it with blasphemies that pass our scrupulous ears without offending them. One will not vaunt one's own merit, but disparage that of others. One will not crudely offend one's enemy, but malign him artfully. National hatreds will die out, but so will love of Fatherland. Scorned ignorance will be replaced by a dangerous Pyrrhonism. Some excesses will be proscribed, some vices held in dishonor, but others will be emblazoned with the name of virtues; one will either have to have them or to affect them. Let those who wish to do so, extol the sobriety of the Wise men of the age, but for



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*Part 1*

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myself I see in it nothing but a refinement of intemperance as unworthy of my praise as their artful simplicity.\*

[15] Such is the purity our morals have acquired, this is how we have become good Men. Let Letters, the Sciences, and the Arts each claim their share in such a salutary achievement. I shall add but one reflection; that if an Inhabitant of some distant lands seeking to form an idea of European morals from the state of the Sciences among us, the perfection of our Arts, the propriety of our Theater, the politeness of our manners, the affability of our discourse, our incessant professions of goodwill, and from this bustling race of men of all ages and conditions who, from early Dawn until the setting of the Sun, seem at pains to oblige one another; this Stranger, I say, would guess our morals to be precisely the opposite of what they are.

[16] Where there is no effect, no cause need be sought: but here the effect is certain, the depravity real, and our souls have been corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection. Shall it be said that this misfortune is peculiar to our age? No, Gentlemen, the ills caused by our vain curiosity are as old [10] as the world. The daily rise and fall of the Ocean's waters have not been more strictly subjected to the course of the Star that illumines us by night, than has the fate of morals and probity to the progress of the Sciences and Arts. Virtue has been seen to flee in proportion as their light rose on our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed at all times and in all places.

[17] Consider Egypt, that first school of the Universe, that fertile climate beneath a brazen sky, that famous land from which Sesostris long ago set out to conquer the World. It became the mother of Philosophy and the fine Arts, and soon thereafter was conquered by Cambyses, then by the Greeks, by the Romans, the Arabs, and finally the Turks.

[18] Consider Greece, formerly peopled by Heroes who twice vanquished Asia, once before Troy, and once in their very hearths.

\* *I like, says Montaigne, to argue and discuss, but only with a few men and for my own sake. For I find it to be a most unbecoming profession for a man of honor to serve as a Spectacle to the Great and wantonly to display one's mind and one's prattling. It is the profession of all our wits save one.*

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*First Discourse*

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Nascent Letters had not yet carried corruption into the hearts of its Inhabitants; but the progress of the Arts, the disintegration of morals, and the Macedonian's yoke closely followed upon one another; and Greece, ever learned, ever voluptuous, and ever enslaved, thereafter experienced nothing but a change of masters in the course of its revolutions. All of Demosthenes's eloquence never succeeded in revivifying a body which luxury and the Arts had enervated.

[19] It is at the time of the likes of Ennius and of Terence that Rome, founded by a Shepherd and rendered illustrious by Tillers of the soil, begins to degenerate. But after the likes of Ovid, of Catullus, of Martial, and that host of obscene Writers whose very names offend modesty, Rome, formerly the Temple of Virtue, becomes the Theater of crime, the scandal of Nations, and the sport of barbarians. This Capital of the World finally succumbs to the yoke it had imposed on so many Peoples, and the day of its fall was the eve of the day on which one of its Citizens was given the title of Arbiter of good taste.

[20] What shall I say of the Capital of the Eastern Empire which, by its location, seemed destined to be that of the entire World, that refuge of the Sciences and the Arts banned from the rest of Europe perhaps more out of wisdom than of barbarism. All that is most shameful in debauchery and corruption; blackest in betrayals, assassinations and poisons; most atrocious in the combination of crimes of every kind; [11] this is what makes up the fabric of the History of Constantinople; this is the pure source from which the Enlightenment in which our century glories has come to us.

[21] But why seek in remote times proofs of a truth for which we have abiding testimony before our own eyes. There is in Asia an immense land where Letters are honored and lead to the foremost dignities of State. If the Sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for the Fatherland, if they animated courage; the Peoples of China should be wise, free, and invincible. But if there is not a single vice that does not rule them, not a single crime that is unfamiliar to them; if neither the enlightenment of the Ministers, nor the presumed wisdom of the Laws, nor the large number of Inhabitants of that vast Empire have been able to protect it from the yoke of the ignorant and coarse Tartar, of what