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“If you don’t have anything to write to me, write that.”

**The ostentatious boredom of the ‘political animal’ in
Cicero's *Letters***

There is little research on boredom in the Graeco-Roman World. And since the focus of the few studies that exist has exclusively been on conceptual reflections of specific mental conditions by ancient thinkers [1], boredom as an actual phenomenon, and the cultural practice of expressing it, have never been a focal point of studies in Greek or Roman societies. One of the reasons for this may be that there are, in fact, only few ego-documents from the Ancient World that can be considered first-hand expressions of emotions. Nonetheless, Greek and Roman literature presents us with quite a number of ‘bored’ individuals – the hermeneutical problem being to identify the motivations behind literary representations of boredom. This problem is especially relevant in cases in which authors actively create their own image of being bored. A striking example are some of Cicero’s letters to his friend Atticus, which he wrote at times when he was politically marginalised and stayed in his rural estates in Latinum and Campania to avoid conflict in Rome (especially in 45/44 BCE). The letters from these periods oscillate between the urge to regain leverage in Roman politics and the awareness that there were no signs for change. Cicero not only describes himself as struggling with the fact that he was forced into inactivity by the state of things, but he also mirrors his own ostentatious boredom onto his addressee who he repeatedly assumes would not have anything relevant to say or do either. Cicero's motivation to show off his boredom in such a way can be explained as a form of political self-stylization in front of his leisure-class friend, by which he presents himself as a political animal caged by Caesar’s hijacking of the state and thus experiencing the dullifying ennui of having to remain on his private estates. At the same time this self-stylization as an inactive politician can be read as a parable on the reversal of the political order during Caesar’s dictatorship.

[1] The most thorough approach was undertaken by Peter Toohey (esp. 2004 and 2011); other studies are exclusively focused on philosophical and theological debates, see e.g. Alciati (2019); Gubatz (2010); Lampe (2008); Robert (2004); Maier (1994). Any attempt at identifying ancient concepts of boredom is complicated by the fact that most modern uses of the term remain under-determined. For a useful suggestion of a flexible definition see now Finkielstein (2024).

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