

**THE ESSAYS OF  
ABRAHAM COWLEY:  
WITH LIFE BY THE EDITOR**

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The Essays of Abraham Cowley: With Life by the Editor by Abraham Cowley

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## COWLEY'S ESSAYS.

### I.

### OF LIBERTY.

**T**HE liberty of a people consists in being governed by laws which they have made themselves, under whatsoever form it be of government: <sup>1</sup> the liberty of a private man, in being master of his own time and actions, as far as may consist with the laws of God, and of his country. Of this latter, only, we are here to discourse, and to enquire

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<sup>1</sup> Cowley, although a royalist, has almost a wider notion of liberty than Milton the Republican, also a Cambridge scholar, at least if we judge from the fragment of Euripides which Milton translated and printed as embodying his own opinion:—

This is true liberty, when free-born men,  
Having to advise the public, may speak free;  
Which he who can and will deserves high praise.

In free speech and its results is Milton's conception of political liberty; in living under laws which men have made themselves, Cowley's. The author wrote this essay in retirement, after suffering the ingratitude of Charles II. and being refused the Mastership of the Savoy.

what estate of life does best seat us in the possession of it. This liberty of our own actions is such a fundamental privilege of human nature, that God himself, notwithstanding all his infinite power and right over us, permits us to enjoy it, and that too after a forfeiture made by the rebellion of Adam. He takes so much care for the intire preservation of it to us, that he suffers neither his providence nor eternal decree to break or infringe it. Now for our time, the same God, to whom we are but tenants-at-will for the whole, requires but the seventh part to be paid to him as a small quit-rent in acknowledgement of his title. It is man only that has the impudence to demand our whole time,<sup>2</sup> though he neither gave it, nor can restore it, nor is able to pay any considerable value for the least part of it. This birth-right of mankind above all other creatures, some are forced by hunger to sell, like Esau, for bread and broth: but the greatest part of men make such a bargain for the delivery-up of themselves, as Thamar did for Judah; instead of a kid, the necessary provisions for human life, they are contented to do it for rings and bracelets. The great dealers in this world may be divided into the ambitious, the covetous, and the voluptuous; and that all these men sell themselves to be slaves, though to the vulgar it may seem a Stoical paradox, will appear to the wise so plain and obvious, that they will scarce think it deserves the labour of argumentation.

Let us first consider the ambitious; and those, both in their progress to greatness, and after the attaining

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<sup>2</sup> Cowley had spent not only days, but days and nights too, in cyphering and decyphering the secret correspondence to and from Charles and his Queen and adherents; with what reward for hard work and fidelity, we know.

of it. There is nothing truer than what Sallust says, "Dominationis in alios servitium suum mercedem dant;" they are content to pay so great a price as their own servitude, to purchase the domination over others. The first thing they must resolve to sacrifice is their whole time; they must never stop, nor ever turn aside whilst they are in the race of glory, no not like Atalanta for golden apples. Neither, indeed, can a man stop himself if he would, when he is in this career :

*Fertur equis auriga, neque audit currus habenas.*<sup>4</sup>

Pray, let us but consider a little, what mean servile things men do for this imaginary food. We cannot fetch a greater example of it, than from the chief men of that nation which boasted most of liberty. To what pitiful baseness did the noblest Romans submit themselves, for the obtaining a prætorship, or the consular dignity! They put on the habit of suppliants, and ran about on foot, and in dirt, through all the tribes, to beg voices; they flattered the poorest artisans; and carried a nomenclator with them, to whisper in their ear every man's name, lest they should mistake it in their salutations; they shook the hand, and kissed the cheek, of every popular tradesman; they stood all day at every market in the public places, to shew and ingratiate themselves to the rout; they employed all their friends to solicit for them; they kept open tables in every street; they distributed wine, and bread, and money, even to the vilest of the people. "En Romanos rerum domi-

<sup>3</sup> Fragment. ed. Mattairs, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> Virgil, Georg. i. 514.—[The chariot is borne onwards by the horses, nor does the wheel give heed to the reins.]

nos!"<sup>5</sup> Behold the masters of the world begging from door to door. This particular humble way to greatness is now out of fashion; but yet every ambitious person is still, in some sort, a Roman candidate. He must feast and bribe, and attend and flatter, and adore many beasts, though not the beast with many heads. Catiline, who was so proud that he could not content himself with a less power than Sylla's, was yet so humble for the attaining of it, as to make himself the most contemptible of all servants, to be a public bawd, to provide whores, and something worse, for all the young gentlemen of Rome, whose hot lusts, and courages, and heads, he thought he might make use of. And, since I happen here to propose Catiline for my instance (though there be thousand of examples for the same thing,) give me leave to transcribe the character which Cicero gives of this noble slave,<sup>6</sup> because it is a general description of all ambitious men, and which Machiavel, perhaps, would say ought to be the rule of their life and actions:

"This man (says he, as most of you may well remember) had many artificial touches and strokes, that looked like the beauty of great virtues; his intimate conversation was with the worst of men, and yet he seemed to be an admirer and lover of the best; he was furnished with all the nets of lust and luxury, and yet wanted not the arms of labour and industry: neither do I believe that there was ever any monster in nature, composed out of so many different and disagreeing parts. Who more acceptable, sometimes, to the most honour-

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<sup>5</sup> Virgil, *Æn.* i. 282:—

fovebit

Romanos rerum dominos, gentemque togatam.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *Orat. pro M. Cælio.*



able persons; who more a favourite to the most infamous? who, sometimes, appeared a braver champion; who, at other times, a bolder enemy to his country? who more dissolute in his pleasures; who more patient in his toils? who more rapacious in robbing; who more profuse in giving? Above all things, this was remarkable and admirable in him, the arts he had to acquire the good opinion and kindness of all sorts of men, to retain it with great complaisance, to communicate all things to them, to watch and serve all the occasions of their fortune, both with his money and his interest, and his industry; and, if need were, not by sticking at any wickedness whatsoever that might be useful to them, to bend and turn about his own nature and lavec with every wind; to live severally with the melancholy, merrily with the pleasant, gravely with the aged, wantonly with the young, desperately with the bold, and debauchedly with the luxurious: with this variety and multiplicity of his nature—as he had made a collection of friendships with all the most wicked and reckless of all nations; so, by the artificial simulation of some virtues, he made a shift to ensnare some honest and eminent persons into his familiarity. Neither could so vast a design as the destruction of this empire have been undertaken by him, if the immanity of so many vices had not been covered and disguised by the appearances of some excellent qualities.”

I see, methinks, the character of an Anti-Paul, “who became all things to all men,” that he might destroy all; who only wanted the assistance of fortune, to have been as great as his friend Cæsar was a little after him. And the ways of Cæsar to compass the same ends (I mean till the civil war, which was but another manner of setting his country on fire) were not unlike

these, though he used, afterward, his unjust dominion with more moderation, than I think the other would have done. Sallust, therefore, who was well acquainted with them both, and with many such like gentlemen of his time, says, "that it is the nature of ambition, to make men liars and cheaters, to hide the truth in their breasts, and shew, like jugglers, another thing in their mouths, to cut all friendships and enmities to the measure of their own interest, and to make a good countenance without the help of a good will." <sup>7</sup> And can there be freedom with this perpetual constraint? what is it but a kind of rack, that forces men to say what they have no mind to?

I have wondered at the extravagant and barbarous stratagem of Zopirus, and more at the praises which I find of so deformed an action; who, though he was one of the seven grandees of Persia, and the son of Megabises, who had freed, before, his country from an ignoble servitude, slit his own nose and lips, cut off his own ears, scourged and wounded his whole body, that he might, under pretence of having been mangled so inhumanly by Darius, be received into Babylon (then besieged by the Persians,) and get into the command of it by the recommendation of so cruel a sufferance, and their hopes of his endeavouring to revenge it. It is great pity, the Babylonians suspected not his falsehood, that they might have cut off his hands too, and whipt him back again. But the design succeeded; he betrayed the city, and was made governor of it. What brutish master ever punished his offending slave with so little mercy, as ambition did this Zopirus? and yet how many are there, in all nations, who imitate him in

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<sup>7</sup> Sallust, De Bell. Catil. c. x.

some degree for a less reward; who, though they endure not so much corporal pain for a small preferment or some honour (as they call it,) yet stick not to commit actions, by which they are more shamefully and more lastingly stigmatized! But you may say, though these be the most ordinary and open ways to greatness, yet there are narrow, thorny, and little-trodden paths too, through which some men find a passage by virtuous industry. I grant, sometimes they may; but then, that industry must be such, as cannot consist with liberty, though it may with honesty.

Thou art careful, frugal, painful; we commend a servant so, but not a friend.

Well then, we must acknowledge the toil and drudgery which we are forced to endure in this ascent; but we are epicures and lords when once we are gotten up into the high places. This is but a short apprenticeship, after which we are made free of a royal company. If we fall in love with any beauteous women, we must be content that they should be our mistresses whilst we woo them; as soon as we are wedded and enjoy, it is we shall be the masters.

I am willing to stick to this similitude in the case of greatness: we enter into the bonds of it, like those of matrimony; we are bewitched with the outward and painted beauty, and take it for better or worse, before we know its true nature and interior inconveniences. A great fortune (says Seneca) is a great servitude; but many are of that opinion which Brutus imputes (I hope untruly)<sup>8</sup> even to that patron of liberty,

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<sup>8</sup> Bishop Hurd says, that this parenthesis "I hope untruly" did honour to Cowley's candour as well as his sense, and he defends Cicero from the imputation of thinking that death,