

STYLISTIC CRITICISM IN ERASMUS' *CICERONIANUS**)

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The complex subject of Erasmus as a critic of Latin style has never been fully investigated, perhaps for good reason. At its highest level of sophistication, such a study would entail minute analysis of his textual work on Latin authors, both sacred and profane; for, then as now, it is in the arena of textual criticism that a man best displays his critical acumen and reveals his own sense of language and nuance. As a humanist in the philological tradition of Valla and Politian, Erasmus was engaged in the slow, painstaking enterprise of recovering Classical Latin.¹⁾ Usage, idiom, preferences of particular authors, the demands of various genres of literature all raise questions that were essential in the early sixteenth century for a proper understanding of Latin Philology. The most logical, non-textual format for pursuing such studies might have been his *Epitome* of Valla's *Elegantiae*, Erasmus' *Epitome* is little more than just that, though his later revision of the work - which goes only part way through the letter A - is a clear indication of what Erasmus might have added to Valla's discoveries and insights.²⁾ On the other hand, and perhaps surprisingly, one reads in the *Ciceronianus* judgments, often general, but sometimes particular, on what comprises Latin style, what does not, and what variety is permitted based on the Classical corpus.

I say surprisingly, because the *Ciceronianus* is not essentially concerned with the Latinity of Cicero or, indeed, devoted primarily to Latin prose style. Beneath its light and genial surface, it is a major chapter in a searing polemic in which a defensive Erasmus proclaims his credo as a humanist scholar. The trouble with the doctrinaire Ciceronians, he

urges, lies not in their aesthetics or their stylistic inadequacies - though the latter are glaring -, but in the limitations on subject matter and scholarship imposed by their standards. Erasmus had no patience with the pretentious recreation of an ambiance suitable in its artificiality to Ciceronian eloquence. There was knowledge to disseminate; important questions of theology to discuss; an audience to be served, educated, and, perhaps, saved. The underlying thesis of the *Ciceronianus* is that if Cicero is worthy of imitation, it is as a communicator; and if one would communicate in the sixteenth century, Cicero's oratorical style is a highly inefficient and inappropriate medium. Such an argument does not depend on stylistic analysis of particular imitations, but would apply with equal force both to the most competent and the most perfunctory example of Ciceronianism: *si nostrum simulacrum, quo M. Tullium effingimus, careat vita, actu, effectu, nervis et ossibus, quid erit imitatione nostra frigidius?* (1374). Yet, there is a good deal of useful criticism and perceptive judgment of Latin prose style in the *Ciceronianus*. I have demonstrated elsewhere, for instance, that Erasmus alone of scholars up to his time and beyond - because later generations of scholars chose to ignore him - made and insisted upon a rigorous distinction between the sentence-structure of Cicero and his universally presumed model, Isocrates.³⁾ He, alone, saw through the specious arguments of another highly polemical work, Cicero's *Orator*, and realized that the Roman orator's admiration for the Greek stylist was severely limited (1509-11, cf. 1478-81).

Comparison between Erasmus' *Ciceronianus* and the later rhetorical works of Cicero, inadequately made by scholars who did not appreciate the intensely polemical quality of either, becomes more compelling when we understand the ulterior motivation of each. As in the *Brutus* Cicero parades a long list of Roman orators who failed to achieve the ideal of *orator perfectus*, so in the *Ciceronianus* Erasmus offers an extensive muster of Latin writers from antiquity to the present to show that not one had successfully reproduced Cicero's style (2791-4363).⁴⁾ There are, however, these differences: while Cicero's *orator perfectus* is an unattainable Platonic ideal, the corpus of Cicero offers a model and a standard by which to judge

Ciceronian imitation; secondly, while Cicero assumes that everyone, save only his perverse Atticist detractors, strove to achieve that ideal of oratorical perfection, Erasmus allows that many Latin stylists had no intention of imitating Cicero; and for this he praises both ancients and moderns. Finally - and here the similarities may outweigh the differences - Cicero praises authors whose oratorical style shows marked improvement over their predecessors, because, though they fell short of the ideal, they advanced the evolutionary process. Erasmus, in his account, records the history of Latin prose style from its Classical apex through its decline in late antiquity and demise in the Middle Ages and lavishes praise on those humanists who participated in the Renaissance rediscovery of the forms and usages of Classical Latin. For while he opposed the goal of strict adherence to Ciceronian standards, Erasmus expected and demanded proper Classical usage.

The corruption of Mediaeval Latin, which Petrarch had begun to protest a century and a half earlier, was still very much a presence in the intellectual world of Erasmus. When one considers the problem of learning what constituted proper Latinity and the difficulty first in finding out what others had discovered and then independently in purifying modes of expression with which one had grown up, the wonder is that the process moved so rapidly.⁵⁾ The goal was *reflorens eloquentia* (3053). Petrarch, Erasmus claimed, for all his efforts, never shook off the *saecli prioris horror* (3058). Leonardo Bruni represented a marked improvement, but among his weak points was an occasional failure to observe *Romani sermonis castimonia* (3082). Erasmus endorses Valla's criticism of Poggio's *impurus sermonis fluxus* (3097). Cicero had given as the first virtue of the orator *latinitas* - a canonical requirement also for treatises on oratory.⁶⁾ To Erasmus' audience, pure Classical Latin represented an ideal that required constant diligence and, often, new information. The scholar of Erasmus' day had less than we of the original material necessary for establishing Classical usage; he was further limited to ancient works of reference, inadequately edited and often whimsically indexed. We tend, from Sidney's slighting phrase, to disparage the "Nizzolian paperbooks",⁷⁾ prepared to keep devoted Ciceronians

to the straight and narrow of Ciceronian vocabulary and phrases. The fact is that Mario Nizzoli's work permitted Robertus Stephanus to produce his *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* in 1551.

Quite early in the *Ciceronianus* Erasmus shows that the goal of strict Ciceronian imitation had its genesis in the drive to relearn Classical Latin.⁸⁾ Petrarch had entertained no illusions about scrupulous adherence to the style of any one model. From the sound principle of learning the language by imitating its best practitioners came with Poggio, Guarino, and others, the more doubtful notion of mastering Latin by exclusive imitation of its best practitioner.⁹⁾ Erasmus knew of Valla's rejection of the latter goal and cites Politian's correspondence with Cortesi and Scala in which he argues against Ciceronian imitation (4299ff.).¹⁰⁾ Erasmus was not, therefore, attempting to break new ground in his theory of imitation. Rather, he was defending his right to do the kind of scholarship he believed important, though it was suspected of being crass popularization; expressing his fear, perhaps not wholly ingenuously, that doctrinaire Ciceronianism might lead to paganism (e.g., 2270); and contending, with supreme polemical irony, that the most sincere professed imitators of Cicero were making the poorest job of it.¹¹⁾

Much more successful and useful, Erasmus implied, were the contemporary Latinists who, without laying claim to Ciceronian imitation, were producing pure, clear Latin prose in addressing themselves with point or grace to subjects of contemporary interest. Erasmus knew that different genres of writing make different demands upon style: in an historian, for instance, one would expect and prefer the style of a Sallust to that of a Cicero (4263). He also knew that Cicero in his *Letters* produced a Latin style different from that of the orations (2722, cf. 4356). He might have gone beyond the hint at 2723 that the style of Cicero's expository works, while not in itself monolithic, is distinct from either the *Letters* or the orations. But, since Erasmus was convinced that the expository style was what was most needed for contemporary communication, he would hardly have suggested to the Ciceronians an alternative Ciceronian style. To them Cicero was the Cicero of the speeches; and for that reason their goal was irrelevant as well as futile.

The polarities of intention in both style and content can be seen in the following citations from the *Ciceronianus*:¹²⁾

Baptista Egnatius preferred learned to Ciceronian discourse (3243).

Faber preferred to talk like a theologian than a Ciceronian (3325).

Alciati preferred exposition to ornate oration (3263).

Bayfius, with an eye to exposition, preferred acuteness and vigor of expression, Attic style to Ciceronian (3354).

Latimer would rather master theology than Ciceronian eloquence (3450).

Linacre considered it better to resemble Quintilian than Cicero (3415).

Valla came closer to the precision and exactness of Quintilian than the spontaneous fluency of Cicero (3100).

This material might at first glance suggest that Erasmus was wholly opposed to the style of Cicero, strongly wedded to anti-Ciceronianism. This is not so; and a careful distinction must be drawn between Cicero and Ciceronianism. The question is one of appropriateness of style to subject. Since the apes of Cicero attempt to imitate his oratorical style - and Erasmus adds the further qualification that they limit themselves to Cicero's more elaborate *exordia* and perorations (1167ff.), they cannot be properly responsive to expository subjects. Even public policy, he notes, is not formulated in forensic debate in public assembly (2694ff.). Here Erasmus makes a virtually unique distinction between styles of oratory directed at different audiences. The main thrust of his argument is that, by and large, the serious business of the humanist should be scholarship (*docere*), which is not served by ornate rhetorical style (*rhetoricari*). If his opponents want to identify Cicero purely with rhetorical flourishes and establish a clear distinction between exposition in direct, accurate language and what Cicero does, so be it: *nec docent, nec movent, nec persuadent* (1116) - precisely the goals of oratory as expounded by Cicero. The *Institutio* of Quintilian is surely a better model for Valla than, say, the *First Verrine* or *De lege Manilia*. On the other hand, Erasmus makes no attempt to deny that Cicero's epistolary style is consistent with characteristics he otherwise identifies with Atticist or expository writers (2813).

Erasmus' use of the epithet, "Atticist", is different in meaning and color from Cicero's when the latter labels his detractors. Erasmus includes under the rubric, apparently,

all good expository writers, but not those who, as he says in the language of Cicero, claimed to emulate the Attic style of oratory while in reality being "arid, threadbare, and lifeless and unable to produce the precision, propriety, and attractiveness of the Greeks" (1155-60). From his description of various laudable practitioners, Erasmus offers a comprehensible, general picture of good Latin expository style. Besides purity of language and lucidity of expression in accordance with best Classical usage, these men are credited with achieving precision through literal vocabulary, careful accuracy through brevity and tight argumentation, and a straightforward, compelling address through the avoidance of ornamentation and self-conscious virtuosity. The qualities they eschewed were a more generous fullness of expression (more copious and eloquent) and any elevation of language beyond literal meaning of words (beyond, that is to say, *proprietas sermonis*) for a more colorful effect. For the main body of published books, this comprises a style undeniably more suitable than one distinguished by obvious rhetorical flourishes and structural arabesques.

The Latin, however, must be pure, i.e., Classical. It is especially instructive to look at Erasmus' descriptions of two men he liked and admired, of whom he would have wanted to speak well, but whose Latinity was defective. Thomas More is credited with unlimited talent; but, when he was a child, the scent of the better literature (Classical Latin as recovered by the humanists) had barely wafted to England. His father had insisted on More's learning English law, than which *nihil est illiteratius*. And, further, More's own commitment to public affairs hardly gave him time to address himself *ad eloquentiae studia*. (This is one of a number of places where Erasmus seems to deny the possibility of "civic humanism"). More's prose style tended rather to Isocratean structure and mediaeval dialectic than the free flow of Ciceronian style - though in urbanity he was not inferior to Cicero (3433-45). Isocratean sentence structure, for Erasmus, is associated with the wearying symmetries of Mediaeval antithesis and parallelism. This holdover from the pre-humanistic age vitiated the prose style also of Rudolphus Agricola. "He was a man of divine spirit,

deep learning, and a far from average style. His prose was strong, effective, elaborate, and well-constructed, but it smacked of Quintilian's eloquence and Isocratean structure (3538)". Since Quintilian is elsewhere praised, it is the collocation with Isocratean structure that is a vice in Agricola. Quintilian's diction is no more suitable to elaborate sentence structure than is the language of Cicero's perorations to the simple syntax of expository prose. But, further, elaborate sentence structure should follow the Classical model of supple periodicity exemplified by, though not limited to, Cicero, not the antiphonal balances of Mediaeval syntax, associated by Erasmus with Isocrates. In the end, though himself guiltless, Agricola was prevented from reaching the Ciceronian ideal (*Ciceronis effigiem effingere*) by the accident of nationality and time, neither of which honored *litterae politicores*. What was for Petrarch in Italy in the fourteenth century the *horror saeculi prioris* was a present impediment in Northern Europe in the fifteenth century, as it was still later for Reuchlin, whose prose smacked of his century - an age Erasmus called *horridius impolitiusque*, though Reuchlin was his contemporary (3587).

Whether fortunate enough to have been born in Italy after the first flush of humanist activity or compelled, alone, to fashion Classical Latin out of the inherited harshness, the gothic angularity of Mediaeval Latin, the contemporary Latinist was judged by Erasmus according to a high standard. Celio Calcagnani possessed erudition and eloquence; his style was both elegant and ornate, but to some degree it savored of scholastic philosophy, which, while it did not prevent him from expressing himself fully, nevertheless excluded him from the ranks of the Ciceronians (3295). Juan Luis Vives, on the other hand, is described in the process of elevating his style to the highest level: "He has talent, erudition, and memory; he possesses a ready abundance of words and thoughts; and although he was at first a trifle harsh, eloquence matures in him daily, giving rise to the hope that he may some day be numbered among the Ciceronians. Some of Cicero's virtues he had not yet mastered, however, especially delightfulness and delicacy of diction" (3676).

The harshness (*duritia*) which one must overcome to produce a praiseworthy Latin style did not begin with the Middle Ages. Erasmus noted a lack of facility in eloquence as early as in Ammianus Marcellinus (2863) and again in Hilarius who is *difficilis et obscurus* (2975). With the scholastic theologians eloquence gets buried and remains under the earth until resurrected by the humanists.

In assessing these writers, Erasmus lays no stress upon the Atticist qualities of concision, directness, plainness, brevity, lack of ornamentation, and absence of urbanity. Urbanity, deliberately eschewed by Linacre (whose model was Quintilian) (3418), is praised as a virtue in which More is not inferior to Cicero. Agricola was lauded for an elaborate style. Both More and Agricola are criticized not because they attempted to use complex syntactic structures, but because those structures were not articulated in the best Classical form. There appears to be a style of Classical Latin prose beyond the expository, plain style, that is worthy of praise. Cantiuncula approached the flow of language, the clarity, the richness and the pleasantness of Cicero. Peter Schade's diction was lively, florid, and clear (3384). Zazius' prose flowed from a rich source; it never stopped, stuck, or ceased to bubble (3618). Other passages might be added from the *Ciceronianus* describing with approval abundance; smooth, gentle, or rich flow; facility of expression; and eloquence.

Clearly, then, while Erasmus rejects the full oratorical style of Cicero as the model of Renaissance Latinity and recommends a plain, expository style as typified by, perhaps, Quintilian, he also countenances a kind of prose that, from his description of it, may be characterized according to the ancient formula of the three kinds of style, as middle. It is distinguished from the expository by its richer flow of language, greater ornateness, facility of diction, and supple complexity of syntactic structure. By including periodicity, as the measured sense of flow in *fluxus* and *flumen* seems to do, while denying the orotundity of Cicero's *exordia* and perorations, Erasmus seems to be making an important, and hitherto unnoticed, distinction: while Cicero wrote ornate, periodic prose, not all periodic prose is so ornate or exclusively Ciceronian. For, in

characterizing the style of Ambrose, Nosoponus says that he was a Roman orator, not a Ciceronian: "He rejoices in clever allusions... he speaks wholly in *sententiae*; his style is rythmical and modulated by phrases, clauses, and parallel constructions... but his style is very different from Cicero's" (2998). Augustine comes close to Cicero in that both round their periods with extensive suspensions, but Augustine does not punctuate that copious flow with phrases and clauses as did Cicero (2994). Leo I's style is praised as rhythmic, as well as clear and intelligent, but even this does not make of him a Ciceronian (3017). This is not, of course, to say, that Erasmus was recommending any of the above as models for Renaissance Latinity. Rather, in describing their essentially periodic styles without criticizing their intrinsic worth, he appears to be acknowledging a kind of Latin that, though not the kind prized by Ciceronians, is also distinct from Atticist or plain.

The whole notion of flow of language, whether limited to periodic syntax or not, is inapplicable to strictly Atticist writers; nor does Erasmus ever attribute *fluxus* to them. Though the *flumen* metaphor is identified with Ciceronian eloquence (e.g. 1519 *fluidum*), Erasmus, nevertheless, uses it of a number of Humanist writers, not only without stigma, but as a positive and laudable stylistic description. He recognizes the vice of such a style, beginning with Gellius' *verborum copia superfluens* (2898). Cicero himself had used *fluens* in both a good and bad sense, depending on the authors' control.¹³⁾ Erasmus seems not to use the metaphor in so complex a way as did Cicero, although he speaks once of a *fluxus impurus* and once of a *fluxus lutulentus*. On the other hand, there is one ancient label applied to excessiveness in the middle style that Erasmus uses in a wholly laudatory way.

The adjective *mollis* and a derived noun *mollitudo*, denoting softness, delicacy, or suppleness, is associated by Cicero with Demetrius of Phalarum, who first deflected oratory from its proper function, which is persuasion, to the goal of pleasing, or charming, its audience.¹⁴⁾ Erasmus cites from Quintilian the criticism leveled at Cicero himself, that he was so smooth in his composition that he seemed to the more severe

sensibilities *mollis* and less than manly (675ff.). But if *mollitudo*, in reference to an overabundance of delicacy or prettiness in eloquence can be a vice of style, it also has a positive side from Cicero onwards in describing an author's success in improving upon the harshness of expression in an earlier and less cultivated age. The Classical example might be Horace criticizing his predecessor Lucilius for his harshness and lack of control over his language. Horace uses the phrase, "he flowed like a muddy river" and the adjective *durus*.¹⁵⁾ After the Classical period, Erasmus can use the same notion to signal decline from the best standard. Hilaris is criticized for his harshness of expression and obscurity; in contrast, because both came from Gaul, Sulpitius Severus was *mollior*, more pleasing, and clearer - superior, surely, as closer to the Classical model (2981). Erasmus uses of Gregory I the same phrase Horace had used of Lucilius, the metaphor of the muddy river, calling him significantly a slave to Isocratean structure as well (3011). If a Renaissance writer can overcome harshness by means of *mollitudo* (as Erasmus claims Vives was doing day by day), if he can achieve a clear, pleasantly flowing style (*iucunditas*), he earns Erasmus' unstinting praise. Casselius has splendid language and sweet composition (3983). Pontanus is lauded for the calm flow of his diction; a certain sweetness in the sound of his words gentles the ear with a pleasing ring (3992). The *illaboratus fluxus* of Beraldus is counted as a great virtue (3337).

Despite his ulterior motivation, then, and a strongly polemical stance, Erasmus, in some important ways, remains true to the subtitle of the *Ciceronianus, de optimo genere dicendi*. He presents, in fact, more than one *genus*. His objection to the adoption of Cicero's oratorical style is logical and cogent, but he is fully as critical of style that fails of the Classical standard because of the taint of Mediaeval Latinity. And while he recommends an expository style without embellishment, copiousness, urbanity, or eloquence in the Ciceronian sense, he praises in some Humanist Latinists the presence of just such characteristics, so long as they do not become mere affectation. We may suspect that a style largely

modelled on, though not in slavish imitation of, Cicero's own expository middle style in the rhetorical works would have won Erasmus' approbation and endorsement.

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NOTES

* The argument of this paper was developed for a talk given at the Central Renaissance Conference, Urbana, Illinois, April 1980. I was fortunate to have received the criticism of Professor John J. Bateman, whose considerable knowledge of Erasmus and Renaissance humanism has helped me to avoid some of the grosser errors.

1) See, most recently, R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship 1300-1850* (Oxford 1976), ch. III.

2) *Epitome D. Erasmi Roterdami in Elegantiarum Libros Laurentii Vallae*, ed. C. L. Heesakkers, J. Waszink: *Opera Omnia Erasmi Roterdami*, I. iv (Amsterdam 1973).

3) "Cicero vs. Ciceronianism in the *Ciceronianus*," *Illinois Cl. St. V* (1980), 163-73. See, too, my *Cicero's Elegant Style* (Illinois U.P. 1979), pp. 26-30, 53 and *passim* for description and demonstrations of the difference between the style of Cicero and Isocrates.

4) References are to A. Gambaro, *Il Ciceroniano* (Brescia 1965).

5) On the enormous popularity of Valla's *Elegantiae*, see J. IJsewijn and G. Tourney, "Un primo censimento dei manoscritti e delle edizioni a stampa degli *Elegantiarum linguae latinae libri sex* di Lorenzo Valla," *Humanistica Lovaniensia XVIII* (1969), 25-44.

6) Derived from a parallel standard in Greek *rhetorica*, it appears in the earliest Roman treatise on rhetoric [Cicero] *Ad Herennium* IV.12.16.

7) *Sir Philip Sidney, The Defense of Poesy et al.*, ed. A. Feuillerat (Cambridge 1923), p. 42.

8) The question of proper models for correct Latinity goes back to late antiquity; see R. Kaster, "Servius and the Idonei Auctores," *AJP* 99 (1978), 181-209.

9) The best study of the movement and the controversy is still that of R. Sabbadini, *Storia del Ciceronianismo* (Turin 1886).

10) In the letter to Vlatten that prefaces the second edition of the *Ciceronianus*, Erasmus claims to have learned only after completing the first edition of the correspondence between Pico della Mirandola and Bembo (Gambaro, *op. cit.*, p. 326ff.)

11) *nulli gestiunt insolentius nomine Ciceronis quam qui Ciceronis sunt dissimillimi* (1305).

12) In what follows I accept the critical vocabulary as Erasmus', whether it falls from the lips of Bulephorus or Nosoponus. I do not necessarily believe that it accurately, in all cases, characterizes the

writers to whom it is applied. But in areas of stylistic judgment the language of the two speakers is hardly distinguishable.

13) There is a striking contrast in two uses of the metaphor at *Orator* 198 *ut ne... aut dissoluta aut fluens sit oratio* and 199 *ad hunc exitum iam a principio ferri debet uerborum illa comprehensio et tota a capite ita fluere, ut ad extremum ueniens ipsa consistat*, though in the first citation the prefix of the first adjective may, by a well-attested Latin practice, be felt with *fluens* as well. (See W. Clausen, "Silva Coniecturarum," *AJP* 1955, pp. 49-51, and C. Watkins, "An Indo-European Construction in Greek and Latin," *HSCP* 71 (1967), 115-119. But cf. *Orator* 220 *dissipata et inculta et fluens est oratio*; *De Or.* III.190 *ne fluat oratio, ne uagetur*.)

14) Cicero *Brutus* 38.

15) Horace *Serm.* I.4.8.