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Imitation, Emulation, Ciceronianism, Anti-Ciceronianism

(8,822 words)

¶ The term 'imitation' in this context does not have the larger philosophical implications of the Greek term *mimesis*, as used by Plato and Aristotle, but rather the more restricted meaning given to it in Hellenistic times and referring to the imitation of a previous author who is regarded as a model of good style. The first Greek writer we know of who spoke specifically about this kind of imitation was Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who lived and worked in Rome about 30 BC. He wrote three books on the subject, of which we possess only fragments. The subject of the second book was precisely imitation, and it gave a list of poets and prose writers worthy of imitation. Many of Dionysius's judgements on individual Greek authors were adopted word for word by Quintilian in Book x of the *Institutiones oratoriae*, which would be of great importance in the Renaissance discussion of the subject. In his views on imitation Quintilian may be more dependent on the lost parts of Dionysius than we can tell.¹ Although Dionysius was for the most part unknown to Renaissance writers, one statement of his accords well with the sentiments expressed by the humanists on this subject. It comes from an essay on Dinarchus, the least esteemed of Attic orators, who tried unsuccessfully to imitate Demosthenes. In criticising this orator Dionysius identifies two kinds of imitation: natural, which is acquired by intensive study, and artificial, which betrays a certain element of contrivance and unnaturalness.²

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Among the early humanists Petrarch was particularly interested in the concept of imitation and the problems it entailed. His own discovery of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* in Verona in 1345 inspired him to form a collection of his own, which are written in a plain style rather than in conformity with the rigid rules of the *ars dictaminis*. His Quintilian manuscript (Paris lat. 7720) is even more heavily annotated than his copies of Cicero, and it is from Quintilian that he learned the important lesson of not imitating only one model, namely Cicero. Petrarch outlines his theories of imitation in a series of letters. The first (I. 8), written to Tommaso Caloiro of Messina, whom he knew from the University of Bologna, takes its inspiration from Epistle 84 of Seneca to Lucilius in its simile of the bees. Petrarch introduces the simile gradually through passages from the fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics*, which describes apiculture. Enlarging on Seneca, he exhorts the addressee to imitate the bees, to take what is best from one's surroundings, as the bees collect pollen and hide it with all diligence in the beehive of one's heart, careful not to lose any of it. It must not remain unchanged, however, but must be transformed into something different and better, a new substance, as the bees change pollen into honey.

In another letter (22. 2), addressed to Boccaccio and written in October 1359, Petrarch informs Boccaccio of certain changes he wished to make in his *Bucolicum carmen* to avoid verbatim repetition of other writers. He distinguishes between writers whom he has read only once and in great haste, like Ennius, Plautus, and Apuleius, and those whom he has read countless times, like Virgil, Horace, Boethius, and Cicero. Of those former writers he culled a few things and retained even fewer, so that they stand out in his memory, and when he uses them he knows immediately that they are not his. In the case of the other writers, they are so much a part of him that he is not conscious of using phrases from them in his own compositions, in this case the *Bucolicum carmen*. Using a rather crude but vivid digestive analogy, he says that he ate in the morning what he would digest in the evening, i.e. he swallowed things as a boy that he would ruminate on as an older man. These writings were absorbed not only in his memory but in the very marrow of his bones, and took root in the innermost recesses of his mind. He thinks of them as his own and is not aware of their source. He proceeds to reinforce his point with yet another simile, a sartorial one this time. He prefers that his style be his own, uncultivated and crude perhaps, but made to fit, as a garment. Recalling Horace, he says that he does not want to adorn himself with another's feathers and be exposed to ridicule like the crow. He does not admit to original genius in himself, like Lucretius, who spoke of wandering over untrodden paths of the Muses, but at times he makes use of the writing of others, not secretly, but with their leave. He is one who delights in similarity, but not sameness (*similitudo, non identitas*), in a resemblance that is not servile. He is desirous of a guide who leaves him free use of his own sight, judgement, and freedom. After all of these abstract definitions of imitation he returns to specific passages of the tenth eclogue of his pastoral poem that he wished to change.

The third letter (23. 19) is again addressed to Boccaccio but written several years later, around 1366. The subject of the letter is Petrarch's description of the efforts of a young aspiring poet, an amanuensis in his own household named Giovanni Malpaghini, who he thinks is imitating Virgil too closely. His advice is that the writer, in contrast to the painter, must not produce an exact likeness, but rather that the similarity be like that of a son to his father. While they may differ in individual features, there is a certain *je ne sais quoi* that remains, what painters call the 'air' or 'aura', especially noticeable in the eyes and the face, which produces a resemblance. The similarity can be detected only through a silent searching of the mind that cannot be expressed in words. One may appropriate another's ideas and rhetorical colouring, but not his actual words. In the first instance the resemblance is hidden, in the second it stands out; the former creates poets, the latter apes. Towards the end of the letter Petrarch recounts that the young poet pointed out to him that he himself had used an exact phrase of Virgil's in his *Bucolicum carmen*, at which Petrarch is somewhat astounded but acknowledges that he did so without knowing it. At the end of the letter he asks Boccaccio to beg Virgil's forgiveness for this involuntary theft of his. One important thing to remember about Petrarch is that despite his great admiration for Cicero's style, unlike the later Ciceronians, he never believed that Cicero was the only model of good Latin. He knew that his style was unique and inimitable, having learned this from his reading of Quintilian x, 2. 25–26, where Quintilian says that the author who is most to be imitated is not also the only one to be imitated. Since it is impossible to reproduce an author entirely, it is best to keep various authors before one's eyes so that something will remain in the mind from all of them.

Petrarch's disciple, Boccaccio (1314–1375), experimented with different Latin styles in his youth, resulting in an eclectic mix of Quintilian, Apuleius, and Tacitus, but after meeting Petrarch in person in 1351, his Latin became less exotic. He made no theoretical pronouncements on the subject of imitation. Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) in his official letters observed the more formal style of mediaeval *dictamen*, but in his private letters he was critical of this tradition. Only in one letter to Leonardo Bruni does he express his views about imitation.³ He does not advocate a slavish imitation of antiquity but recommends that something new (*aliquid novitatis*) be introduced. He acknowledges his debt to Cicero in the use of words, but insists that it is one thing to duplicate an author, another to imitate him. Some element of the imitator must be present, not just a reproduction of the passage being imitated. Salutati was much more liberal than Petrarch in his acceptance of late Latin writers, e.g. Macrobius, Cassiodorus, and the church fathers, but he condemned mediaeval writers like St Bernard, Abelard, and John of Salisbury. In the Quattrocento he was looked upon as one who wrote a decent brand of Latin for a person of his time, but he was certainly not considered a Ciceronian.

Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444) is regarded as one of the great Latin prose stylists of his age. He was especially praised for his mastery of classical prose rhythm, which he had learned through his study of both Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Cicero's *Orator*, discovered in 1421 at Lodi. Another reason for his extraordinary command of the language was his study of Greek under Manuel Chrysoloras. He translated Plato's *Phaedo* into Latin and produced an excellent new translation of Aristotle's *Ethics*. This experience sharpened his sense of vocabulary, of finding *le mot juste* to render the Greek texts. Bruni was perhaps the first to recognise the extraordinary contribution of Cicero in the coining of new terms to translate Greek philosophical concepts, as he emphasises in the *Cicero novus* (1415). He maintained that no one ever equalled Cicero or even came close to him in speaking and writing. Yet in his own writing he followed many models according to individual genres. In his *History of the Florentine People*, for example, his models are Livy principally, Sallust, and Caesar, with the occasional Tacitean terse *sententia*.

In his *De studiis et litteris*, dedicated to Battista da Montefeltro, he recommends the most approved authors for study and imitation. Since the short treatise was written for a woman, Bruni does not hesitate to mention women models right from the beginning: Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, famous for the elegance of her letters, Sappho, and Aspasia, the famous mistress of Pericles. Then he recommends various fathers of the church, both Greek and Latin, with a special emphasis on Lactantius Firmanus, known as the Christian Cicero. Of pagan authors his choices are predictable: Cicero ('Quanta facundia! Quanta copia!' (What eloquence! What richness of style!)), Virgil, Livy, and Sallust. For the composition of prose he gives precise instruction in rhythm, in which he himself excelled.

Of the various writers on education in the Quattrocento, Guarino da Verona is the most worthy of attention. Like Bruni he studied under Chrysoloras and translated from the Greek, although in this activity he differed from Bruni in his usage of the original Greek word when a good Latin substitute was not available. He cites Quintilian for this precedent (Quintilian 1, 5. 8). Like so many other preceptors from this time, he is not a strict Ciceronian by any means. In one of his letters he mentions that he had recently acquired a manuscript of Pliny's *Letters*, and shortly afterwards, in another letter, he describes his villa in Valpolicella in terms of Pliny's description of his estate (*Letters*, 5. 6) He avoided the excesses of a writer like Apuleius but found Pliny's style congenial. His compact *Regulae grammaticales* was a major innovation in grammar textbooks and was reprinted hundreds of times.

Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) always prided himself on being a true follower of Cicero and was impatient with people like Valla who preferred Quintilian to Cicero. As a matter of fact, his own style betrays a more eclectic quality. The most that can be said of him is that he aspired to the style of Cicero but did not attain it. In a well-known phrase from one of his epistles he boasts that he jotted down whatever came to his mind (literally his mouth),

'quidquid in buccam venerat', a phrase of Cicero's (*Letters to Atticus*, 1. 12. 4),⁴ and even *vulgaria*, in this context referring to the vernacular, although it is sometimes wrongly translated as 'vulgarisms'. Poggio also invents Latinised Italian words like *merdosus* and indulges in humorous examples of kitchen Latin. He claims that he wrote his letters *ex tempore*, but this is dubious. In his *Facetiae* (Witty Sayings), mostly of a scurrilous nature, he uses words freely taken from Plautus, Catullus, and Martial.

A prolonged altercation between Poggio and Valla ensued in 1452, sparked by a supposed criticism of Poggio's Latin made by Valla in a copy of his letters.⁵ It went on for more than a year in a series of invectives and responses. In a first *Oratio* Poggio attacks Valla's *Elegantiae* for his hypercriticism of all classical writers except Quintilian, whom he prefers to Cicero in his rhetorical writings.⁶ In his answer, *Antidotum primum*, Valla, with his superior knowledge of the language, is able to list page upon page of unclassical words used by Poggio and enumerate grave faults in syntax and rhythm. There is no question about who is victorious on technical grounds. Poggio could not answer Valla's searing criticism. In the *Elegantiae* Valla holds to this position, often equating Cicero and Quintilian as the twin paragons of Latin prose style. He was justly criticised, however, by Paolo Cortesi for his preoccupation with lexis and the precise meanings of individual words, while his own writing lacked the elegance of the well-constructed period.⁷

The question of imitation generated many disputes in succeeding years. The most famous of them is undoubtedly the exchange of letters between Poliziano and Cortesi, which therefore deserves more attention than the others. It began when Cortesi sent a collection of Latin epistles written by his friends to Poliziano for his opinion. They presumably would all have been written in the Ciceronian style. Poliziano was merciless in his response. I shall give an excerpt of the opening blast in my own translation:⁸

I send back the letters that you have so diligently collected. In reading them, I must say with all frankness that I am ashamed to have wasted my time on them. Except for a very few, they do not deserve to be read by any cultured person or to be collected by you. I am not going to point out to you of which ones I approve and of which ones I disapprove. I do not wish anyone to like or dislike them on my authority. But there is one thing concerning style in which I disagree with you. As I understand, you only approve of those who reproduce the outward features of Cicero's style. In my opinion the form of a bull or a lion is more respectable than that of an ape, even if an ape looks more like a man.

And so it continues with quotations from Seneca, Quintilian, and Horace to reinforce his point. Poliziano remarks facetiously that those Ciceronian parrots think they are Cicero's blood brothers because they finish their sentences with *esse videatur*.⁹ Those who write in that fashion have no strength or life; they lack energy, feeling, and character; they lie supine, sleep, and snore. He ends the paragraph with a famous statement: 'Someone will say, "You do not

express yourself like Cicero.” So what? I am not Cicero but, as I see it, I express myself.’ In the rest of the brief letter he urges Cortesi not to let himself be bound by this superstition that prevents him from being himself and does not allow him to take his eyes off of Cicero. Poliziano assures Cortesi that he gives him this advice out of his love and admiration for him. He urges him not to follow in another’s footsteps but to have the courage to strike out on his own.

Cortesi’s reply is courteous and conciliatory. He says immediately that he was taken aback by Poliziano’s opening words about having wasted his time reading the letter, repeating many of Poliziano’s own words. He does not dare to oppose Poliziano’s opinion, ‘since’, he says sarcastically, ‘somehow it is not allowed to disagree with you’. Then, quoting Cicero, he says that he is one who would not judge another even if he were able, and would not be able to do so even if he wished. He denies categorically Poliziano’s accusation that he does not approve of anyone who does not imitate the Ciceronian model, asserting that with all the various models at our disposal, it would be stupid to limit ourselves to one model. The reason for the great decadence of eloquence is that writers follow no model at all, like strangers in a foreign land who do not know the language and are without a guide. Without hesitation, however, he cites Cicero as the best model, recognised as such by all ages, and his own model from childhood. He claims that no one since Cicero’s time has attained glory without being nourished and brought up by him. Adopting similes probably taken from Petrarch, Cortesi prescribes that true imitation is not the similarity of an ape to a man, but of a son to his father. Yet he prefers to be a follower and an ape of Cicero rather than a pupil or son of anyone else.

Cortesi’s most original contribution to the debate is the philosophical ingredient, that literary imitation is linked to the Aristotelian dictum of art imitating nature. All knowledge is founded on previous knowledge. To sustain this he quotes, in his own words, a principle of scholastic philosophy: ‘Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius in sensu’ (There is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses). As McLaughlin points out,¹⁰ he implies that Cicero embodied the genus of eloquence and all others were simply species of it. In deference to Poliziano he uses as examples of successful imitators of Cicero writers whom he himself admired, especially Quintilian, on whom Poliziano gave his inaugural lecture in the Florentine *Studio*. In that lecture he made the famous comment that writers like Quintilian and Statius were less read because of the misconception that what was different from Cicero and Virgil must necessarily be inferior. To support his statement he quotes the recently discovered *Dialogue on Orators* of Tacitus: ‘nec statim deterius esse quod diversum est’ (not everything that is different is automatically inferior).¹¹ Yet in the matter of oratory Quintilian names Cicero as his unqualified choice as a universal model: ‘apud posteros vero id consecutus ut Cicero iam non hominis nomen sed eloquentiae habeatur. Hunc igitur spectemus, hoc propositum nobis sit exemplum’ (for posterity Cicero has become not so much the name of a man as a synonym for eloquence itself. Let us fix our eyes on him, let him be the model we set

before ourselves).¹² Cortesi himself was not a staunch Ciceronian. Even in this answer to Poliziano he uses words not found in the words of the orator, but in general the style is Ciceronian.

Poliziano is an important voice in the imitation debate. He contributed to the theoretical and the scholarly discussions, and also illustrated his literary credo of *docta varietas* (learned variety) in original compositions both in Latin and in the vernacular, showing himself always to be an advocate of pluralism over purism. While it is true that his acceptance of *recherché* vocabulary, especially in his philological works, is much more liberal than that of Valla, he always maintained his respect for Cicero. He defends him in the very opening chapters of the *Miscellanea* as 'latinae copiae genitor et princeps' (the father and prince of Latin richness of style). He was the untiring adversary of extreme Ciceronianism, which he condemns on numerous occasions, as in his rejection of the letters Cortesi sent him. As far as this epistolary exchange is concerned, there can be little doubt that Poliziano must have taken offence at some of Cortesi's insinuations, such as when he spoke of his own undeviating emulation of Cicero as a salutary habit, considering that those who chose an inferior nourishment were victims of a corrupt stomach and immoderate illness ('corrupti stomachi et intemperantis aegri'). Poliziano never answered Cortesi's letter, and his name disappeared from his *epistolario*.

It would be useful at this point to review what Erasmus has to say about this dispute in the *Ciceronianus*. He had obviously read it carefully. To begin with, he says that Cortesi's letter is less Ciceronian in style than Poliziano's. He is also far from resembling Cicero in that he misses the point of the argument. Erasmus charges him for conducting the case as if Poliziano were trying to discourage the imitation of Cicero, whereas Poliziano's criticism is directed against those who without any other training wish to reproduce Cicero's outward features, and for that reason he calls them apes. Furthermore, he criticises those who go begging for scraps of Cicero and, without producing anything of their own, follow in the footsteps of others. He says he cannot stand people who advertise themselves as Ciceronians when they are anything but Ciceronians, and who have the nerve to criticise learned men of letters. Therefore, he advises his friend that when he has worn out the pages of Cicero and other excellent writers, when he has learned them by heart and thoroughly digested them,¹³ then he can put aside that pedantic concern for imitating Cicero and Cicero alone, never letting his eyes stray from his features.

Bulephorus, alias Erasmus, then asks his interlocutor: 'Is this deterring people from imitating Cicero? Is this teaching that no one should be imitated at all?'¹⁴ Bulephorus then accuses Cortesi of contradicting himself: At first he says that he has no love for those who ape Cicero, but shortly afterwards he says that he would rather ape Cicero than be the pupil or son of someone else. Bulephorus continues to ridicule Cortesi's argument, and in the end he

concludes that the letter Cortesi produced with such care was more prolix than Ciceronian, and that Poliziano, treating it as irrelevant, did not bother to reply. Despite being accused of being un-Ciceronian, he was able to write a more Ciceronian letter than Cortesi, and although it was briefer, it was more shrewdly argued in language that was appropriate, stylish, and meaningful. Of course, we must remember that Erasmus had great regard for Poliziano's Latin. At the end of the letter he states that he does not mean to offend Cortesi, since it is no disgrace to come second to the well-nigh inimitable Poliziano.

The polemic that took place between Ermolao Barbaro (1463–1494) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) in 1485 is not directly concerned with imitation, but it does enter into a discussion of matters of style. The philosophical ideas put forth here by Pico will be repeated by his nephew, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, in the debate with Bembo in 1512. Barbaro first sent Pico a rather flattering letter in which he says that Pico has trimmed his florid style to imitate Barbaro's own rather arid and threadbare style, but in such a way that he makes it his own and embellishes it with his own elegance. But then he suddenly launches into a gratuitous attack against writers of scholastic Latin, branding them as squalid, crude, uncultured barbarians.¹⁵

Pico's return letter of June 1485 begins similarly, with exorbitant praise of Barbaro's language and ideas, remarking that he and Poliziano reread his letters continually, so enamoured were they of his style. He says, ironically, that Barbaro's words about the crude language of the philosophers have made him feel regret for his many years of study of Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Averroes, and Albert the Great. Using the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia, he conjures up a spokesman for this race of maligned barbarians, one more clever than the rest, who might be able to defend their cause in a language that is not too barbaric. The speaker immediately broaches the antagonism between rhetorical artifice and the truth of philosophy. He declares that philosophers do not idly dispute who was the mother of Andromache (an echo of Juvenal), but investigate the basic principles of all things, human and divine. Their Mercury, i.e. eloquence, resides not in their tongue but in their heart. The orator's occupation is to lie, to deceive, to circumvent, to trick. The latter Latin verb, *praestigiari*, is unclassical, which is true of much of the vocabulary of Pico's letter. For example, he has the speaker compare ostentatious eloquence to a pretty, saucy young girl ('*moribus lepidam atque dicaculam*'), a phrase taken directly from Apuleius,¹⁶ betraying his own predilection for the eclectic style. But elegance of style does not become philosophers. Not for them the effeminate walk, like that of a stage actor or dancer, the clever gestures, the languid looks of the orator. Philosophers are concerned about *what* they write, not *how*. The orators had accused the philosophers of not speaking Latin or Roman. That may be so, but to say that therefore they do not speak correctly is wrong. Giving a name to things (the technical grammatical term *impositio* is used) is purely

arbitrary, in whatever language. The truth can be spoken in French, English, or Spanish. When the Greek philosophers searched the heavens to discover the order of the universe, they knew nothing about the characteristics of the Latin of Cicero, Pliny, or Apuleius.

Barbaro's formal response is equal in length to Pico's epistle. After the usual bouquets of politeness he resorts to the same rhetorical ploy of prosopopoeia, save that he pretends this is a real person, not a phantasm dragged up from the dead, as was Pico's. He says he has learned from a friend in Padua that Pico's specious defence was poorly received, so much so that one among them, less asinine than the others, made a response to it. The reported speech begins scornfully, 'Picus iste, quisquis est, grammaticus opinor, parvo pedi calceos magnos circumdedit'¹⁷ (This guy, Pico, whoever he is, a grammarian, I think, is a little too big for his britches). Barbaro argues through his spokesman for a middle style, an Attic rather than an Asiatic form of oratory. He refutes Pico's assertion that Cicero did not require eloquence in a philosopher by citing cogent passages from three separate works of Cicero.¹⁸ In the end, through the clever argumentation of the fictitious scholastic philosopher, Barbaro thinks that he has sufficiently proved that Pico's defence is a failure. It was not his fault. It is just that the cause was not defensible. Barbaro ends the letter with a barrage of Greek phrases and proverbs, no doubt to impress his formidable opponent. In this letter Barbaro clearly shows himself not to be a Ciceronian at heart, although he could adopt a more Ciceronian style when necessary.

Pico della Mirandola's nephew, Gianfrancesco, was the next to take up the cudgels on the subject of imitation, defending his uncle's style of Latin in a letter to Pietro Bembo dated 12 September 1512. Actually, he had done so before in the preface to his *Life of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, in which he affirmed that Giovanni Pico was more interested in *res* (content) than in *verba* (words), and put sacred and arcane wisdom above mere verbal embellishment. As a philosopher and theologian himself, he transfers the discussion to a higher plane. He speaks of the innate instincts and intellectual propensities with which we are endowed by nature, and to this he adds the theory of innate ideas propagated in the circle of Ficino in Florence, of which his uncle was a member. The Idea of good writing is given to us by nature. It is the imitation of the beautiful, which each one finds in himself and reflected in the writings of others, not the rules of rhetoric, that will instil the art of writing. This kind of imitation cannot be confined to only one writer but must extend to all of the best authors. To prove his point, Gianfrancesco cites an example from Cicero's *De inventione* (2. 2. 1–5) of the painter Zeuxis of Heraclea, who when he was commissioned to paint the image of Helen for the temple of Juno in Croton, chose five of the most beautiful young women in the city as his models. Pico rejects the principle of imitation followed by those who reproduce only the exterior features of Cicero's style, both good and bad. Real imitation is not passive but uses what is best in others to create one's own style. He gives greater importance to *inventio* than to the other parts of rhetoric, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. He also reiterates an argument previously used by Poliziano

that Cicero himself varied his style in his different works. The younger Pico uses a variety of images to reinforce his argument, such as that of a wall, which may be constructed with Cicero's bricks but will not constitute a *Tullianus paries* (a Ciceronian wall).¹⁹ The real object of his censure, however, is the Ciceronians, who, like Pietro Bembo, pretend to be able to speak like Cicero on any topic.

Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) begins by rejecting the Neo-Platonic idea of an innate faculty of eloquence in the individual, which he says exists only in the mind of God. The art of good writing can be acquired only by long reflection, reading, and exercise. He thinks it absurd to attempt to imbibe the essence of various writers and attempt to reduce it to a unified synthesis. Cicero is the sole model to follow, but that is not to say that one should not read other great authors like Caesar, Sallust, and Livy. Imitation for Bembo is not a mechanical, sterile act, but is allied to emulation, an active creative quality that can inspire one even to surpass the model. Contrary to Gianfrancesco Pico's emphasis on originality (*inventio*), he insists on the artistic collocation of phrases (*dispositio*) and *elocutio*. Pico wrote back with no change of heart whatsoever, insisting on drawing inspiration from within, using the same Platonic language as before, only more profusely. There was no further response from Bembo.²⁰

Ironically, the book that brought Ciceronianism to everyone's attention and is still the most well-known expression of the phenomenon is Erasmus's brilliant satire, called precisely *Ciceronianus*. Its subtitle, *De optimo genere dicendi*, which Betty Knott translates as *On the Ideal Latin Style*, recalls an essay by Cicero of the same name, more commonly known as the *Orator*. In several letters written during May and June 1526, Erasmus makes reference to a sect, as he calls it, prevalent especially in Rome, which under the guise of wishing to purify the Latin language was in reality initiating a form of neo-paganism. Erasmus scoffs that if Cicero himself were to return, he would laugh at them.

In March 1527 Erasmus received an alarming letter from a follower of his in Spain, Pedro Juan Olivar. The opening pages of the letter are missing, but it is quite clear that they contained a summary of the charges that were being brought against him in Valladolid. The correspondent also gives Erasmus an intimation of how he was viewed by certain members of the imperial court residing there at the time. They were men of great eminence—Baldassare Castiglione, author of the *Book of the Courtier*, then papal nuncio to Spain, and the Venetian scholar Andrea Navagero. According to Olivar, they were constantly ranting about Erasmus's literary style, saying to him, 'Your friend Erasmus has turned from a Latin to a barbarian', and comparing him unfavourably with the Neapolitan poet Pontano, an erstwhile Ciceronian. Olivar confides to Erasmus that a certain Italian humanist, Benedetto Tagliacarne, a man of

little repute, called him a 'Dutchman' (the Latin adjective *Batavus* had taken on the connotation of 'barbarous' or 'unrefined' from a passage in the epigrams of Martial). This candid report must have set Erasmus to thinking.

In a long letter to Francisco de Vergara, a professor of Greek at the University of Alcalá, written 3 October 1527, Erasmus dwells on this subject more openly and at greater length. He was probably already at work writing the *Ciceronianus*. It was their anti-Christian sentiments that most offended him, an aspect of the controversy that had not been discussed, of course, in the writings of Italians on the subject. He says: 'They take offence if the name of Christ is mentioned in literary works, as if what is not pagan is not elegant. To their ears "Jupiter, greatest and best" sounds more polished than "Jesus Christ, redeemer of the world" . . . People of this persuasion think it almost more disgraceful not to be a Ciceronian than not to be a Christian.'²¹ Erasmus goes on to say that he prefers a more rugged, more compact, more sinewy style, less adorned and more masculine. Besides, he says, even among those who have no other model than Cicero, no one up to now has reproduced a faithful likeness of him. He himself is not interested in an empty veneer of language, a dozen words borrowed here and there from Cicero, but wants to capture the spirit of Cicero in its totality.

It was not long before Erasmus decided to put pen to paper and air his views on the subject. He chose the form of a dialogue since he intended it for young students, and this pedagogical device would hold their attention better. The two main characters of the dialogue are Bulephorus (from Greek βουλευφόρος, 'giver of counsel', an epithet used for princes and leaders in the *Iliad*) and Nosoponus (from the two Greek words νόσος, 'sickness', and πόνος, 'toil'; it might be translated as 'workaholic'). The former is the personification of Erasmus's views, the latter is usually equated with Christophe de Longueuil, a native of Brabant and therefore a fellow Dutchman. At an early age he went to France to study, and from there he went to Rome, where he became the favourite of Pietro Bembo and Jacopo Sadoletto, distinguished Ciceronians. Despite his great abilities, things went wrong in his career in Rome, which he was forced to leave, and he died a pauper in Padua at the early age of thirty-three. Although Erasmus caricatures many traits of Longueuil, I do not think we should identify him with Nosoponus. Erasmus was too clever to do that. At the end of the work he has words of great praise for Longueuil and says that his death was a grave loss to scholarship.

The opening scene is highly amusing, as Bulephorus and his sidekick, Hypologus, a supporting character, spot the feverish, emaciated Nosoponus coming towards them. Bulephorus diagnoses his malady as *zelodulea*, Greek for 'style-addiction'. He is wasting away in his efforts to win the coveted title of 'Ciceronian'. He complains that the Italians have never awarded it to anyone north of the Alps except Longueuil, recently deceased, at which Hypologus interjects a brief encomium. Nosoponus explains that he has assembled three huge tomes, each one larger than the last, on all aspects of Cicero's language, which two strong packhorses could hardly

carry. At this point the conversation turns to minute linguistic discussions. Nosoponus describes his nightly vigils spent composing a single sentence of a letter. As for speaking, he avoids using Latin for fear of contaminating the sacred tongue. Except for simple greetings, he uses French or Dutch.

Bulephorus makes some good arguments about certain failings of Cicero himself, like how he criticised his own works or failed to submit some works to revision, like the *De legibus* (this was probably a posthumous work). In addition, he says that the Cicero we have is defective and mutilated, and some of those disfigurements were introduced by certain audacious Italians with a smattering of scholarship. Furthermore, we have to reckon with apocryphal works of Cicero, like the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Valla was the first to raise doubts as to its authenticity). He points out that Cicero took liberties with the iambic metre in translating Greek verse into Latin and also blames him for quoting archaic verse, which he characterises as crude and uncouth. As might be expected, Erasmus brings in Cicero's infamous line of verse ridiculed by Juvenal: 'O fortunatam natam me consule Romam', which might be parodied in English as 'O Roman state so fortunate, whose natal date my consulate'.

While pretending to play the enemy of Cicero, Erasmus demonstrates an astonishing knowledge of Cicero's works, which he quotes extensively and critically. As the dialogue continues, Bulephorus, alias Erasmus, makes some shrewd pedagogical observations and backs them up with examples. 'If we want to be successful in our imitation of Cicero', he says, 'the first thing must be to conceal our imitation of Cicero'.²² In the matter of using Christian phrases at the beginning of a letter, like 'Gratia, pax, et misericordia a Deo patre et domino Jesu Christo' (Grace, peace, and mercy from God the Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ), as in many of St Paul's salutations, Erasmus resorts to the important rhetorical doctrine of *decorum et aptum*, the fitting and appropriate. In accordance with this principle, Cicero would use these same phrases if he were alive today, Erasmus asserts. How much more appropriate it is that the Christian should deliberately abandon the example of Cicero. In the person of Bulephorus, Erasmus hammers home his message: 'Wherever I turn I see everything changed, I stand on a different stage, I see a different theatre, a different world. What am I to do? I am a Christian and I must talk of the Christian religion before Christians.'²³

Then Bulephorus relates a story, which Erasmus would have us believe is a true one, of an experience he had when he was in Rome in 1509. A certain person had been appointed to give an oration on Christ's death on Good Friday. Erasmus was invited to attend so that he could hear how the language of Rome sounded in a Roman mouth. Erasmus does not name the speaker, but he does mention that at that time Tommaso Fedra Inghirami, called the Cicero of his age, was at the peak of his fame.²⁴ The preface and peroration, almost longer than the entire speech, were taken up with singing the praises of Julius II. Instead of depicting the sacrifice of Christ to save mankind, the preacher treated it as any other historical event,

comparing the spiritual triumph of the cross to the triumphs of Roman generals. Yet this aspirant after the Ciceronian idiom won the plaudits of the Ciceronians. Erasmus's Nordic sense of piety instilled by the Brothers of the Common Life when he was a boy must have been deeply offended by this spectacle.

Erasmus continues his charge of paganism, sheer paganism, on the part of the Roman Ciceronians, Christians in name only. He returns often to the concept of true imitation and its perversion by the devotees of Cicero. The first thing to remember, he says, is that no one should try to copy Cicero if his natural bent is totally different from Cicero's. Otherwise he will end up like some kind of monstrosity, having lost his own natural form without having acquired anyone else's. Cicero himself had read every one of his predecessors and decided within himself which ones merited his approval, but he absorbed them in such a way that one cannot recognise any one author. Erasmus uses the image of the bee, as Seneca and Petrarch had done, but enlarges on it in a very adroit manner. He says that bees do not immediately turn everything they gather into honey, but first change it into a liquid in their mouths and entrails and then reproduce it, transmuted into their own substance, in which there is no longer any trace of the flower or shrub they sipped. The discussion turns again to the concept of *decorum*, what is fitting and appropriate. Bulephorus asks Nosoponus whether Cicero's style would have suited the time of Cato the Censor, and, answering his own question, says that Nosoponus would surely agree that his elaborated style would not have fit that sober and frugal age. After several other examples he makes this telling argument. Even if we allow that Cicero's eloquence served some purpose in his own time, of what use would it be today? In the law courts the business is conducted by means of articles and legal terminology by lawyers who are anything but Ciceronians, and it is done before adjudicators who would think Cicero a barbarian. There would be no use for it in the council chambers either, since the language used there is French or German. And what about letter writing? To whom would one write Ciceronian letters except scholars, and they are few and far between.

At the end of this part of the dialogue Bulephorus uses a clever ploy. Nosoponus protests that Bulephorus is presenting a splendid case, but he cannot rid himself of this passion. Bulephorus admits that he felt like that once, but he recovered from the malady. To Nosoponus's request to know the name of the doctor and the medicine, Bulephorus responds in Greek that it was ὁ λόγος τῷ λόγῳ, i.e. 'the word treated me with the word', with a play on words on the two meanings of λόγος, 'speech' and 'reason'.²⁵ Dr Word diagnosed that Bulephorus was suffering from being refused the name of Ciceronian—which Nosoponus immediately recognises as his own malady—and Bulephorus now assumes the role of Dr Word and attempts to treat Nosoponus with logotherapy, as it were. This is the springboard for the last, lengthy part of the dialogue, in which Bulephorus mentions hundreds of writers, beginning with the long catalogue Cicero put together in the *Brutus* and ending with contemporary Latin writers, all of whom Nosoponus shows to be non-Ciceronians. In the case

of certain figures, like Bembo and Sadoletto, Erasmus is very cautious in passing judgement, both because he respected their Latinity and also because he did not wish to offend these respected prelates. In general, however, he is ruthless in his remarks, with the result that he offended many and vainly tried to apologise later. In the end Nosoponus asks his interlocutor what he really thinks of Cicero. He replies generously, 'I consider him the supreme master of the art of speaking and, for a pagan, a good man'.²⁶ He sums up all of his counsels regarding imitation, insisting especially that true imitation consists not in the outer layer of verbal expression, but in substance and sentiments, in intellectual ability, and in right judgement.

As might be expected, Erasmus's animadversions elicited severe reactions from all sides, especially from France, since Budé was considered by Nosoponus as less Ciceronian than the scholar-printer Josse Bade. Most of these speeches are simply recriminatory, intended to avenge Cicero's honour, which Erasmus never disparaged. He merely made fun of the apish attempts of the Ciceronians to imitate him. Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558) wrote a particularly vicious indictment in an *Oratio pro Marco Tullio Cicerone in Erasmum*, a monument of hatred, although a few years later he wrote a grieving epitaph to commemorate Erasmus's death.

Another stylistic movement in opposition to the canons of Ciceronianism, albeit not overtly, began at the beginning of the Cinquecento, and it was not so much eclectic as eccentric. It took its inspiration from the second-century author Apuleius, a native of Madoura (present-day Mdaourouch in Algeria). He cultivated a very heterogeneous style favouring archaisms and obsolete words, neologisms, strange rhythms, and convoluted constructions. His works had been known in the Middle Ages, but it was Boccaccio who rediscovered him and transcribed the sole manuscript that contained his most famous work, the *Golden Ass*, and imitated his style in his Latin works. The *editio princeps* appeared in Rome in 1469, and in 1500 Filippo Beroaldo the Elder (1453–1505), professor at the University of Bologna, published a commentary on the text, a folio volume of nearly six hundred pages, in 1500. The introduction is written in a highly baroque prose that harks back to Apuleius but also to the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius, written around AD 170, a collection of miscellaneous notes supposedly taken on winter evenings spent in Athens. Beroaldo's disciple, Giovanni Battista Pio (1475–1542), went much further than his teacher in his archaizing. He chose for his sources the grammarians and philologists of the second and third centuries. One was Nonius Marcellus, an African of the Constantinian period who wrote a treatise entitled *De compendiosa doctrina* in twenty books, a veritable encyclopaedia of everyday terms for articles of clothing, food, domestic utensils, etc. To illustrate this antiquarian vocabulary he cites passages from early Latin authors: Ennius, Naevius, Pacuvius, and Accius. Such a trove of archaic vocabulary was a godsend for this school of writers. The Ciceronians facetiously referred to this manner of writing as the African style and used the word *curiositas* to describe its exaggerated interest in the strange

and the arcane, as it had been used previously of Apuleius himself. The generalised use of archaising language did not attract many followers because of its difficulty, and it degenerated into affectation.

A more direct challenge was launched against the exaggerations of Ciceronianism, and for that matter against Cicero's prose style in general, in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. It came from two leading continental scholars, Marc-Antoine Muret (1526–1585) and Justus Lipsius (1547–1606). Both took as their models writers of the Silver Age of Latin literature—Seneca, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger—but ignored Quintilian, who was too much in the Ciceronian mould and had condemned Seneca in very severe terms in the tenth book of the *Institutio oratoria* (Training of an Orator), where he gives his comparative critical judgements of Greek and Latin authors. Quintilian says of him: 'His style is for the most part decadent and particularly dangerous because of the seductiveness of the vices with which it abounds.'²⁷ Muret's inaugural speech as professor of eloquence at the University of Padua, delivered in 1554, is a full-blown Ciceronian oration on the excellence of literary studies. In 1563 he became a professor, not of rhetoric but of moral philosophy, at the *Collegio Romano*, and in his first three public lectures his style remained moderately Ciceronian. When he surprisingly took Roman law as his subject in 1567, the initial discourses became more openly non-Ciceronian. Instead of the balanced, elaborate structure of Cicero he used shorter sentences, simple vocabulary, and terse, epigrammatic expressions. Asked to occupy the chair of rhetoric, he gave an introductory lecture on the *Tusculan Disputations* of Cicero, which turned into a powerful diatribe against the Ciceronians. Despite opposition from conservatives, Muret based his lectures and his own compositions more and more on the pointed, incisive style of Sallust, Seneca, and Tacitus. This last writer was famed both in antiquity and in the Renaissance for his obscurity and asperity of style, but Muret praised it for its piquancy. At the time of his death he left his commentaries on Seneca unfinished.

As was also true of Muret, Lipsius's first publication, *Variae lectiones* (1569), reveals the typical copious Ciceronian style prevalent in academic circles of the day. Soon after this he met Muret in Cardinal Ippolito d'Este's palace in Tivoli, and from this meeting he was irrevocably converted to the new style. He set to work immediately on an edition of Tacitus, which he finished in 1575. Almost immediately after completing this he began work on his great edition of Seneca, which appeared in 1605, the year before his death. This was to have an extraordinary influence in establishing the prose style of seventeenth-century authors—Montaigne, Pascal, Francis Bacon, Quevedo. In his own prose style Lipsius reproduces many of the technical features of Seneca: the avoidance of parallelism, the omission of connective particles, the frequent use of antithesis, repetition, broken rhythms, parentheses, a deliberate *inconcinnitas*, and a lack of elegance. It was a revolutionary style in his century as it had been

in Seneca's, but Lipsius does not have the clever *sententiae* (sententious sayings), brilliance, and acumen of his model. Joseph Scaliger, his successor at the University of Leiden, severely criticised his style, telling his students that he didn't know what kind of Latin that was.

The difficulty with the anti-Ciceronian style was that this kind of Latin could not be taught, since it disregarded the rules of syntax and structural elements, whereas Ciceronian Latin provided objective standards and a model for the re-creation of what we now call Neo-Latin. On the other hand, the loose structure of the new style could be more easily blended into the style of the vernacular through a process of cross-fertilisation. The complicated Ciceronian syntax could not easily be transmitted to an uninflected language. In this prolonged linguistic battle the Ciceronians emerged triumphant for a time, but their anachronistic efforts at purism mummified the language and hastened the proximate triumph of the vernacular.

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Notes

1. Donald A. Russell, 'De imitatione', in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*, ed. by David West and Tony Goodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 6.

2. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Critical Essays*, transl. by Stephen Usher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), II, p. 269.

3. *Epistolario di Coluccio Salutati*, ed. by Francesco Novati (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1891–1905), vol. 4, p. 148.

4. *Lettere a Niccolò Niccoli / Poggio Bracciolini*, ed. by Helene Harth (Florence: Olschki, 1984), p. 3.
5. It is now known that these notes were made by a Catalan student of Valla's, who took umbrage at some adverse remarks about Catalonia that were made by Poggio.
6. As a young man Valla wrote a *Comparatio Ciceronis Quintilianique*, no longer extant, in which he claimed that Quintilian was superior to Cicero.
7. Paolo Cortesi, *De hominibus doctis*, ed. by Giacomo Ferrà (Palermo: Il Vespro, 1879), p. 144.
8. Latin text and Italian translation are to be found in *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, ed. by Eugenio Garin (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1952), p. 902.
9. This rhythm of a paeon plus a spondee was ridiculed as Cicero's favorite by Quintilian (x, 2. 18).
10. Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 205.
11. Poliziano, 'Oratio super Fabio Quintiliano et Statii Sylvis', in *Prosatori*, p. 879.
12. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and transl. by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), X, 1. 112.
13. Erasmus quotes Poliziano verbatim in these three verbs: *contrivisset*, *edidicisset*, and *concoxisset*. *Prosatori*, p. 904.
14. Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, transl. by Betty Knott, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), vol. 28, p. 444.
15. Ermolao Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, ed. by Vittore Branca, 2 vols. (Florence: Bibliopolis, 1943), I, pp. 85–86.
16. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 2. 7.
17. *Prosatori*, p. 846.
18. Cicero, *De finibus*, 1. 3. 8; *Tusculan Disputations*, 1. 3. 5; *Academics*, 1. 33.
19. *Le epistole 'De imitatione' di Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola e di Pietro Bembo*, ed. by Giorgio Santangelo (Florence: Olschki, 1954), p. 35.

20. Santangelo thinks that the second letter was never sent, p. 17.

21. *Correspondence of Erasmus*, transl. by Charles Fantazzi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), vol. 13, Ep. 1885, pp. 366–367.

22. *Ciceronianus*, p. 368.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

24. John O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), p. 114, proved that it could not have been Inghirami, since his speech on the passion was delivered five years earlier, although it is in the same theatrical style.

25. The quotation is from Plutarch's *Consolation to Apollonius* by way of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* 3. 31.

26. *Ciceronianus*, p. 445.

27. Quintilian, transl. Russell, x, 1. 29.

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