

CICERO VS. CICERONIANISM IN THE 'CICERONIANUS'*

H. C. GOTOFF

In 1528 Erasmus published the *Ciceronianus*, the most extensive and important single document in the debate that in some ways dominated intellectual history in the Humanist period. The fact that the controversy had little to do with Cicero's style is acknowledged by some, but needs still to be asserted. The further points, that Erasmus, nevertheless, displays a unique understanding of Cicero's periodic composition, but that his contribution to Ciceronian studies has been all but ignored, remain to be established.

The Ciceronian controversy begins with the ambitious, early Humanist goal of recovering Classical Latin. The notion of limiting oneself exclusively to the model of Cicero was rejected at the outset by Petrarch.¹⁾ Its later adoption as an ideal reflects the manifestly different intention of using Latin, not as an actively regenerating, living language, but as a formal, traditional medium. The futility of

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1) So Erasmus says of him, *Cic.* p. 661, having in mind, perhaps, what Petrarch says about imitation in *Epp. Fam.* XXII 2. 8-21; esp. 16: "alioquin multo malim meus mihi stilus sit, incultus licet atque horridus, sed in morem togae habilis, ad mensuram ingenii mei factus, quam alienus, cultior ambitioso ornatu sed a maiore ingenio profectus atque undique defluens animi humilis non conveniens staturae." See, too, R. Sabbadini, *Storia del Ciceronianismo* (Turin 1885), pp. 7-9 (Petrarch on the poetry of Giovanni da Ravenna).

such an effort was early recognized by Valla and others, while so strong an advocate as Poggio was unable to translate his enthusiasm into the prose of Cicero. Yet, somewhere along the way, the intention and ideal of strict adherence to Ciceronian Latinity (though in reality it came down to no more than limiting oneself to the vocabulary of the extant works of Cicero) were adopted by the religious and cultural establishment of the early Sixteenth century--Catholic and Italian.

Erasmus was too good a Latinist to ignore the stylistic failure of the doctrinaire Ciceronians, too interested in communicating to restrict his style in so slavish and perfunctory a manner. Besides, his independent, inquiring mind could not limit itself to the traditional goals of a conservative, exclusive academic establishment. His treatment of texts both sacred and profane--updating and correcting them for availability to a wider reading public--offended and frightened the conservatives. As early as 1525 a friend suggested that if Erasmus did not appear to be challenging the authority of the Church Fathers and scholastic teaching in areas approaching Divine Law, his style would not have come under criticism.²⁾ Here, then, is the basis for Erasmus' own polemics. He saw the formal restrictions of Ciceronianism as the symbol of much more important intellectual limitations put on his work; while his opponents, on the other hand, might with some justification charge him with being a "popularizer". In the controversy, however, the terms were elevated: his opponents accused him of Lutheranism; he charged them with neo-Paganism. They drew a national border to Humanism at the Alps and condemned Erasmus' Latinity

2) P.S. Allen, *Erasmi Opus Epistolarum VI* (Oxford 1926) (no. 1579), pp. 81-2: "si enim a placitis Ambrosii, Hieronymi, Augustini, Gregorii et subsequentium sanctorum doctorum--quae, certo tene, inconcussa sunt secuti Guillelmus Altisiodorensis, Halensis, Thomas, Bonaventura et ceteri probati scholae huius magistri, in illis quae proximius divinum ius attingunt--tuus non dissensisset intellectus, nimirum omnibus stilus placuisset." Natalis Beda, author of these remarks, was the appointed representative of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Paris inquiring into points of heresy detected in Erasmus' works (Allen, *op. cit.* p. 65).

(along with that of every other non-Italian, save Christopher Longueil); he depicted them as incompetent to succeed at Ciceronian imitation and, besides, of living in a delusory world--for their attempt to cast contemporary Rome in a Republican setting he judged to be futile and grotesque. Thus, while the purported subject of the *Ciceronianus* is described in the sub-title as *de optimo genere dicendi* and alluded to within the dialogue as "imitation", Erasmus vigorously attacks the Paganism of Italian Ciceronianism and its inappropriateness, concluding that the true Ciceronian would be less concerned with the techniques of style than with the vital, contemporary subjects of Christian theology. He scorns what he calls the *lineamenta* of Ciceronian style, insisting that not one of the self-professed Ciceronians can successfully reproduce the model. Further, he expresses admiration for a number of people who deliberately rejected Ciceronian imitation. Ruellius preferred writing about medicine and translating Greek to being a Ciceronian; Wm. Latimer, in his piety, would rather perfect theology than Ciceronian eloquence; Bayfius preferred exposition to Ciceronianism; Gaza wanted to express Aristotle; Valla preferred Quintilian; the list could be extended. The eloquence of Hermolaus Barbarus actually was harmed, to Erasmus' mind, by his philosophical studies. Quite apart, then, from mastering the style, the style itself is not necessarily appropriate or desirable.

In view of the general and pervasive arguments against the aims and principles of the Ciceronians, it is almost incidental that Erasmus offers so much particular stylistic criticism. He makes distinctions one looks for in vain in the writings of most other Humanists--men who contented themselves with the generalities that had gone unexamined and unchallenged in the tradition. The irony is that no one paid the slightest attention to this aspect of the *Ciceronianus*. Not only did the sloganeering continue from the Italian side, but others, offended by the manner of their inclusion or insulted by their omission from the panoramic description

of the styles of contemporary scholars, added a new level of vituperativeness to the by-now hopelessly confused and only perfunctorily literary debate. Erasmus' real contributions to stylistic criticism of Cicero were ignored for four hundred years.

It would be wrong to lay the blame for this unenlightening state of affairs exclusively at the doorstep of the Humanists. Let it be emphasized that the Ciceronian controversy could never have taken the form that it did in the Sixteenth Century, had the critical standards and terminology for describing style not come down from antiquity in a muddle. The confusion began in the last years of Cicero's own life; and he was, himself, to some degree responsible for it. *De Oratore*, after all, was a largely political work--an attempt not to explain oratorical style, but to identify and aggrandize the Roman Orator-Statesman. The elements of an *ars rhetorica* it contains are derivative, often perfunctory. Cicero is defending the serious, practical, peculiarly Roman profession of which he had become the acknowledged master and which, after 55 B.C., was being rendered increasingly redundant by the un-Republican governance of the Triumvirate. The *Orator* was published a decade later, when Cicero's skills and talents had not only been made superfluous by the political upheaval at Rome, but were also under critical attack from a group of purportedly literary detractors who called themselves Atticists. The origins of the Atticist-Asian controversy are unclear and much debated; a vague, literary antithesis seems to have developed between a lush, ornamental, self-consciously artistic, periodic style, on the one hand, and a tense, unadorned style, terse and simple, on the other. Cicero was the target of Atticist criticism; but since his recent oratorical production was at its most restrained, the charge of Asianism, if ever applicable, was surely so no longer. For his part, involved in an unpleasant, personal controversy, Cicero took, in the *Orator*, a polemical stance calculated rather to defeat his opponents' arguments than to explain and defend his own stylistic preferences and

techniques. (The suggestion, here, of a psychological parallel between the controversy of the mid-40's B.C. and that of the early Sixteenth Century is not casual.) Cicero's debating point is that he is more Attic than the Atticists, because true Atticism should incorporate the virtues of a variety of Athenian orators, including the elegance of Isocrates and the power of Demosthenes as well as the simple purity of Lysias. Demosthenes, Cicero's sole Athenian ideal and closest model, was a true political orator and a stylist whose force and *copia* were denied, by definition, to the Atticists. The inclusion of Isocrates was less than wholly sincere. Isocrates was not a forensic orator; and his "sweet style of oratory, smoothly flowing, clever in thought, euphonious in diction" is precisely that epideictic style several times specifically excluded by Cicero from the realm of serious oratory.³⁾ Nevertheless, Isocrates was firmly entrenched in the Attic canon of orators and had perfected a style also denied to the Atticists. Hence, he is a convenient and telling weapon in Cicero's polemical armory. Isocrates, after all, had won the approval of Socrates and Plato, however impractical Cicero believed his symmetrical balances, strict concinnity, and involved periodicity to be in addressing the courts or assembly.

In view of such qualified praise, the later, universal identification of Cicero with Isocrates needs explanation. Quintilian is not responsible for it; he compares Cicero quite exclusively with Demosthenes. I may advance some possible reasons. First, as the antithesis between periodic and non-periodic prose became fixed, it would be natural to classify Cicero and Isocrates together. Next, as political oratory lost vitality and relevance in the Imperial age, oratory turned more and more towards declamation: precisely the epideictic prose that Cicero rejected in the practical sphere. In the absence of a pressing, contemporary context, orators devoted more time to those elements of a speech directed at the *captatio audientium benevolentiae*, the parts where

3) Cic. *Orator* 37f., 65.

Cicero, himself, was least at pains to disguise his artistry. Erasmus would later say of Humanist oratory that it was made up largely of *exordia* and perorations; and he observed that what Renaissance Ciceronians endeavored to imitate were the openings of Cicero's speeches. (Erasmus obviously did not have in mind the *Catilinarians* or the *Philippics*, where Cicero generally dispensed with such pleasantries; nor were such *exordia* the models for Ciceronian imitators.) Finally, whatever the strictures upon it, Cicero describes epideictic prose in great technical detail; and later scholars have had a tendency to apply to Cicero the technical vocabulary Cicero himself used to criticize epideictic oratory: concinnity, balance, symmetry.

By the time of the Renaissance, the ability to dispose one's material in a shapely period--that is to say, the ability to write Classical Latin--was a virtue to be attempted and a difficult task to master. Cortesi could criticize Leonardo Bruni's style for lacking *circumscriptio ulla verborum*. George of Trapizonz merely recast three sentences of Guarino into a single period to make it "Ciceronian". No one was suggesting that, while Cicero wrote periodic prose, not all periodic composition was Ciceronian--no one, that is, until Erasmus. With such imprecise criticism and such a vague understanding of what prose composition entails, the description by Cicero of Isocrates' style might be applied equally well to Cicero himself. When, in the *Antike Kunstprosa*, the youthful Norden, in discussing the antithetical style in Renaissance prose, devotes separate sections to imitation of Isocrates and of Cicero, the distinction is illusory. The advocates of each had the same stylistic features, essentially Isocratean, in mind. So Vives, in *De ratione dicendi*, illustrates Isocratean style with citations from the corpus of Cicero; Ascham is pleased with the progress of his royal pupil, Elizabeth, who has learned, by the study of Livy, Cicero, Isocrates, and Sophocles to discern and appreciate apt and felicitous antitheses.⁴⁾ While antithesis certainly

4) E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (Leipzig 1898), Vol. II, pp. 799-802.

has its place in the architecture of Cicero's prose, the careful reader will not have to be persuaded that it has nothing like the same formative value that it does in the composition of Isocrates.

The failure for centuries of admirers and detractors of Cicero alike to attend to the basic elements of stylistic technique, though perhaps surprising, was almost universal. During so much of the Renaissance, after all, one had merely to proclaim oneself Ciceronian or anti-Ciceronian with no discernible effect on one's style. In the midst of controversy, such sloganeering is understandable, even expected. The language of polemics is not the sharp, clear report of a rifle bullet, but the messy, indiscriminate spray of shotgun pellets. The failure of later scholars to make the necessary and by no means obscure distinctions requires a different explanation. I can only surmise that the size and variety of the corpus of material and the conservative force of tradition were inhibiting factors.

It was not until the late Nineteenth Century that Wilamowitz remarked in passing on the comparative reserve of Cicero's late oratorical style.⁵⁾ This was not mere parroting of Cicero's perhaps disingenuous characterization of his early work as *iuvenalis redundantia*. The German scholar was referring to the *Caesarianae* and specifically to the *Philippics*. It was another hundred years before another scholar analysed the structure of Cicero's oratorical prose and demonstrated that the later production is distinguished by shorter, less complex periods. This awareness has still not been incorporated into the tradition. Yet, in the *Ciceronianus*, Erasmus noted, in 1528: "Even if policies were argued today in Latin, who could stand Cicero perorating as he did against Verres, Catiline, Clodius, or Vatinius? What Senate has enough time and patience to endure the speeches he made against Antony, though there he is more mature, less redun-

5) See W. Ralph Johnson, *Luxuriance and Economy: Cicero and the Alien Style* (California 1971), pp. 1ff.

dant, less exuberant in his eloquence".⁶⁾ Erasmus offers no proof or analysis to support his claim; he merely indicates his perception and the sensitivity of his reading. No one appears to have noticed it.

Analytical, rather than judgmental criticism has come late and unevenly to Ciceronian studies. Not until W.R. Johnson's *Luxuriance and Economy: Cicero and the Alien Style* did anyone examine in detail the structure of Cicero's prose. Working independently on sentence structure--the architecture of Ciceronian periodicity--I have been able to demonstrate an apparently little known fact: in his periodic composition, Cicero uses the balanced, symmetrical, antithetical structures employed by Isocrates as a foil. He deliberately and consistently suggests the Gorgianic figures of parallelism, balance, and echo only to disappoint the expectations they raise by equally deliberate inconcinnities. The observation supports the claim, which had to be made as recently as in 1952, that in his periodic composition Cicero far more resembles Demosthenes than Isocrates.⁷⁾ Yet, the similarity of Ciceronian and Isocratean prose styles has been assumed and asserted without discrimination by dispassionate scholars as well as polemicists, throughout the tradition.

Awesome in its indication of Erasmus' independent genius is the fact that the writer of the *Ciceronianus* was aware of and insisted upon a rigorous distinction between the style of composition of the two authors.

I know of no detailed study of Erasmus' literary criticism in the *Ciceronianus*. His main concern was not literary; and, beyond that, his definition of style went far beyond techniques--the *Ciceronis lineamenta*, as he called them--to encompass context and circumstances. Cicero would not have argued with such an approach to oratorical criticism. When Erasmus says, as he did on a number of occasions, that not one of the self-claimed Ciceronians is capable of reproducing

6) *Cic.* p. 654.

7) Eric Laughton "Cicero and the Greek Orators" *AJP* 82 (1961), 27-49.

Cicero, he refers to something that goes far beyond the devices of composition and diction. Yet, even in the limited realm of literary techniques, Erasmus adduces precise and accurate criteria for determining what is, and is not, Ciceronian. In this he is unique.

Essentially, Erasmus derives his critical vocabulary from Cicero and Quintilian--as do practically all other scholars. But while everyone else was content to utter epithets and repeat bland generalities, Erasmus examines and distinguishes. He was, as Douglas Thomson has noticed, perhaps the only scholar before the late Nineteenth Century to analyse *clausulae*--set, rhythmical cadences as sense-pauses.⁸⁾ In identifying two such patterns, he relies on Cicero for one, the double trochee; for the other, his analysis is wholly independent.

In the realm of sentence-structure, or composition, Erasmus again shows a way of criticizing and distinguishing prose styles that, if attended, might have advanced the study of Cicero in particular and Latin prose in general. First, he was not satisfied with the oversimplified division between periodic, i.e., Ciceronian or Asian, and non-periodic, i.e., anti-Ciceronian or Attic. In characterizing the styles of Latinists from late antiquity to contemporary times, he insists that not all periodic prose is Ciceronian. Thus: Ambrose's prose may be rhythmical and modulated, with balanced clauses and phrases, but that makes of him a Roman orator, not a Ciceronian. Augustine is Ciceronian in his use of complex periods, but he does not punctuate that copious flow with clauses and phrases as did Cicero. More recently, Zazius' style flows from a most abundant source; it does not stop, stick, or pause. But to Erasmus, it sounds less like Cicero's style than that of Politian, whose diction is entirely unciceronian. Erasmus frequently applies, as here, a two-tiered standard. The feature that must be present in the ideal Ciceronian does not *ipso facto* produce Ciceronian

8) D.F.S. Thomson "The Latinity of Erasmus", *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London 1970) n. 20.

imitation. Thus, characteristics like the *suavis compositio* of Casselius or the *mollitudo* of Vives would sound in Cicero like descriptions of Isocrates or, worse, of Demetrius of Phaleris. When Erasmus applies the terms to neo-Latin writers he means that their possessors have improved on the *duritia* of scholastic Latin and are eligible to be criticized by a Ciceronian standard. Ultimately, neither succeeds.

The period flow of syntax is essential to Ciceronianism. Lactantius mastered it; though in other respects he falls short. Cantiuncula's *fluxus* is praised as a Ciceronian quality. Gregory I, on the other hand, had a *fluxus lutulentus*, a muddy flow, and a sentence structure in the Isocratean mold. And that, according to Erasmus, is a *Cicerone alienum*.⁹⁾

This distinction is boldly made and employed elsewhere. Thomas More leaned rather to Isocratean structure and dialectic exactness than to the flowing stream of Ciceronian diction. Rudolph Agricola smacks of the diction of Quintilian, but he is essentially Isocratean in structure. Now, Norden cites this judgment in the section where he fails to distinguish Isocratean from Ciceronian style. In an article on Isocrates and Euphuism, another scholar cites all three passages only to support his argument that Isocrates is not the source of Euphuism.¹⁰⁾ The larger point, the distinction between Isocrates and Cicero, is ignored. Of all scholars, only George Williamson, in *The Senecan Amble*, seems to have realized the magnitude of the distinction Erasmus makes.¹¹⁾ Yet, having understood the distinction, Williamson puts forth a thesis, that Erasmus is essentially an Atticist, which tends once more to lump Cicero and Isocrates together.

The opposition of Ciceronian flow to Isocratean sentence structure suggests that Erasmus was well aware of the stylistic difference. The antiphonal, bi-partite periodicity of Isocrates, with its symmetrical balance and parallel or

9) *Cic.* p. 660.

10) T.K. Whipple "Isocrates and Euphuism", *M.L.R.* XI (1916), pp. 15-27, 130-135.

11) G. Williamson *The Senecan Amble* (Chicago 1951), pp. 29ff.

antithetical restatement does not flow progressively to reach a rhetorical climax, but falls back upon itself with wearing and all-too-predictable redundance. Though, in attributing Isocratean sentence structure to More and Agricola--two men he liked and admired--Erasmus seems to endorse it as an alternative to Ciceronian composition, he is, in fact, harsher elsewhere: *Nec Isocratis laudaretur compositio, nisi perspecuitas dictionis et sententiarum gravitas illi patrocinaretur* ("Isocrates' style would not win praise, were he not favored by the clarity of his diction and the depth of his thought").¹²⁾ It is a pity for Ciceronian studies since the Sixteenth Century that such observations and judgments by Erasmus have gone unheeded.

University of Illinois at Urbana

12) *Cic.* p. 633. Cf. *Cic. Orator* 41 and 42.