Golden Latin Artistry

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Editor's Note: Mr. Wilkinson's book *Golden Latin Artistry* was published by the Cambridge University Press, price 47/6, on April 26th. It deals with sounds and rhythms and 'periodic' or the art of sentence structure in Latin prose and verse, giving aesthetic reasons and theories as well as facts and stylistic history. As these topics are of importance to teachers of Latin, *Didaskalos* invited Mr. Wilkinson in a brief article to touch on some aspects of his book.

Ancient critics from Theophrastus onwards, influenced no doubt by the prestige and popularity of rhetoric, concentrated to a large extent on matters of style; and we should pay attention to what they say, not only because they were sometimes sensitive and intelligent, but because they knew better than we can what ancient authors were trying to do. Latin is not one of the great literatures for the interest or originality of the thought it embodies: its greatness depends on art: and experience tells us that perceiving how a writer gets his effects does not spoil our appreciation but enhances it. An important aspect of Latin literature can be inaccessible to many readers through a deficiency in their equipment.

To begin with: are verbal sounds melodious or otherwise in themselves? Ancient critics thought they were, and despite some modern sceptics we may give guarded assent. It is partly at least a matter of ease in enunciation. But alliteration and assonance were also regarded as embellishments, and so they can be (we think rather of rhyme). Some writers also seem to have a better ear than others for general sound-texture. But of course euphony

and cacophony should be subordinated to the overriding law of propriety (appropriateness to the subject); whereas there have been poets down the ages who have been seduced into seeking to be euphonious all the time. As T. S. Eliot has emphasised, 'dissonance, even cacophony, has its place'. This leads us on to what is generally known as 'onomatopoeia' – an unsatisfactory word for which I prefer 'expressiveness' (French *expressiveté*). Here again the ancients have much to say, though moderns, both writers and readers, seem to vary remarkably in their sensitivity to it and in the value they attach to it. Propriety is a fundamental canon of writing, which can be expressive in a wide variety of ways, including both the crude echoing of sounds and the subtlest metaphor from verse-technique to subject – indeed the rare pleasure it can give is analogous to that we derive from metaphor. Now if we believe that sound is important both musically and expressively in Latin literature, clearly we should do our best to pronounce the language as the Romans did. There is more evidence for this than is generally imagined, and apart from the question of accent there is little in dispute.

But it is a mysterious fact that, as experiments can show, neither melody nor expressiveness come into play unless they are activated by subject-matter. This gives a splendid opportunity to sceptics to pour cold water. They can point out, for instance, that sounds alleged to be expressive in a particular passage are used also in passages where the meaning is entirely different; or that in passages alleged to be particularly euphonious, if the change of a letter or two completely alters the sense, the euphony seems to evaporate. One is driven back to acknowledging frankly that there is a mystery here, but one to whose importance poets and readers have borne testimony in many languages for more than two thousand years. One can also point to cases in which poets, independently to all appearance, have used similar elements for similar ends; and to that extent we have objective evidence.

Then there is rhythm, so difficult to define. How did the Romans read their verse? Did they emphasise the quantitative

metre? Or was there an interplay between that metre and the accent (stress or pitch? – another dispute) of normal speech? I believe that, like ourselves, they recited verse as they spoke their language, the metre being felt as an undercurrent. At all events we have what seems good indirect evidence that, in dactylic verse, accent (presumably containing at least an element of stress) did play a part. This theory explains not only the major restrictions to which Roman poets of the Golden Age subjected first the hexameter and then the pentameter, but also most of the minor rules which must puzzle and exasperate the learner who is offered no explanation for them. Effects of great subtlety seem to many to be created by this interplay, especially in Virgil; and again, where the same combinations are found to be used in similar contexts, that is evidence that we are not simply being fanciful. Yet there are many who remain sceptical – and not only Frenchmen, who believe that the Latin accent was no more one of stress than the French and that it played no part in verse. In Horace's lyric, however, the interest centres rather on the effects that could be obtained from the various metres as adapted by himself to the genius of the Latin language and on the reasons he may have had for choosing the one he did on each occasion. Accent does not seem to have played much part here ('*Lesbium servate pedem meique pollicis ictum*'), nor in prose rhythm, unless we are convinced by ingenious theories, such as that of Broadhead. And this must give us pause; for why should dactylic verse have been exceptional?

Prose-rhythm provides another jungle of controversy, the more obscure because it is agreed that there is no underlying regularity. Latin prose rhythm was much discussed by Renaissance critics, but for some reason the knowledge gained, and indeed the subject as a whole, was forgotten or neglected for nearly three centuries. Interest revived about 1880, to culminate in the monumental treatises which Zielinski produced in the decade before the first world war. But how many of those who inculcate his metrical clausulae realise that the seven commonest forms, those generally taught, account together for no more than

56.5 % of Cicero's sentence-endings? It was his Roman followers who pedantically stereotyped them. What Cicero repeatedly emphasised, even though he did not always practise what he preached, was the virtue of variety in everything. It was natural that Isocrates and Aristotle, the pioneer critics, should analyse prose-rhythm in terms of feet, since prose had only recently developed as an alternative to poetry, and no other approach would suggest itself. Yet such analysis seems ultimately unhelpful, as can be seen in Saintsbury's wholesale application of it to English prose. Others, ancient and modern, have suggested that when prose strikes us as rhythmic it is because it has embedded in it sequences of what the ear recognises, consciously or subconsciously, as verse-rhythms; yet one thing that most ancient critics emphasised was that a complete verse at least was a blemish in prose. Others again have tried to validate hints in ancient criticism that rhythm pervaded periods throughout.

Here we have to unravel the tangles caused by ambiguity in the use of the word 'rhythm' (and in the use of the word *numerus* in Latin). I should use 'rhythm' in this case to denote only arrangements of long and short syllables (which some distinguish by the name of 'metric'). I should not use it, as many do, to include the proportion or harmony as between members that make up a 'period' (still less of the effect of such stylistic figures as antithesis and chiasmus); these belong to a separate subject, sometimes known as 'periodic'. It was probably only by a historical accident that these features were ever grouped together: all were introduced simultaneously by the Sophists who first made prose artistic. The matter of the adjacent chapters in which Aristotle considered them separately, *Rhetoric III*, 8 and 9, was too often confused by later writers.

Nor must we be obsessed with Cicero in any study of Latin prose rhythm. The historical style which was introduced by Sallust and reached an extreme in Tacitus was quite different. Sallust was reacting against the oratorical manner which had characterised history since Ephorus and Theopompus, the pupils of Isocrates. His sentences tended to be short and abrupt, with

asyndeton and a trick of avoiding normal word-order. His style was far from 'periodic': it did not seek to charm the reader, but to stimulate him by a series of jolts.

And what is a 'period' anyway? In what sense is it what the word suggests, a circuit? The ancients were not clear: Aristotle implies one explanation, Demetrius another. But we know at least that artistic structure of clauses was a characteristic. Cicero was surprised to find that, although early Latin writers threw off good periods here and there, they did not seem to have observed their effectiveness and cultivated them. He himself successfully applied the art to Latin prose. Many people appear to think that a period is essentially a long sentence ('rolling periods', etc.). It need not be so. They may also think that long sentences are the hallmark of Cicero's prose, which is true only of his earlier work, when he was under the influence of the Asiatic tradition. In his later speeches, sensitive perhaps to the criticisms of the plain style Atticists, he used far more *pugiunculi* ('little daggers'), as he called them, to vary his sword-play.

Livy, who thought of himself as a Ciceronian, is in fact a stylist apart, and a great one. He often wrote long sentences, but his art is expressive rather than periodic. Nettleship contrasted him with Cicero: he 'tempers and varies his grammatical constructions so as to produce a welded mass of writing over which the reader must pause before he can grasp it as what it is, a carefully articulated whole'.

Virgil, who introduced into Latin poetry the periodic art of Cicero, did not use long sentences except for special reasons, since his work was designed for recitation and would gain by facilitating breath-control: his style is paratactic rather than hypotactic, forceful rather than rolling. But he mastered the art associated with periods and used it with infinite variety; as did Horace, in whom there is also such subtle interplay of period and stanza.

Finally, there are in Augustan poetry those elaborate and strangely pleasing syntactical patterns of words, an almost unique feature permitted by the exceptional flexibility of Latin

word-order. There is the 'Golden Line' and its variants, which depend on separation of epithet and substantive; this separation also produces effects, perhaps largely unintended, which presage the rhyming 'Leonines' of the Middle Ages, as well as elaborate patterns such as we find in the Pyrrha ode of Horace. All in all, there is plenty of food for discussion.

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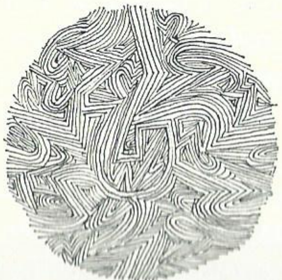

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