The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 95–98.
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Cicero on Plurality and Persuasion

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doi:10.1017/S0034670523000475

Style is easy to dismiss but crucial to understand, and Goodman's explanation of why style matters politically is one of the reasons that I, as a specialist in Roman rhetoric and political thought, appreciate his book. The absence I see in Goodman's book haunts my own work too; I have only just begun seriously applying myself to the task of rethinking and redress.

A key part of Goodman's answer to why style is important arises from the spirit of the old saw "As a man speaks, so he is." Cicero defends his own elaborate, high style and criticizes Attic oratory, the plain-speaking kind associated with Julius Caesar, because only the complexity of the high style can reflect the variety of views and values and bases of knowledge the audience represents. As I understand Goodman, he is saying that elaborate style acknowledges the artificiality of the political relation and conveys to the listener something like this: Here we all are; we need some common way to articulate ideas and plans, but our condition of plurality means that plain speaking cannot meet our needs; it does not allow for plurality or nuance or divided loyalties. Style steps in and articulates, even if it can never resolve, our differences.

Goodman is right to call on Cicero's criticism of the unadorned Attic speaker to support his argument. The Atticist's refusal to stylize his speech ignores his obligation to speak to and for and with everyone listening. It refuses to accommodate the audience's plurality of perspectives and opinions. Such a speaker is guilty of "contempt of court" in a very real sense. Goodman finds in Cicero's preferred speech norms a nugget of what we can usefully and accurately call democratic thinking, because these norms "encourage speakers to present themselves as looking on the issue at hand from a range of standpoints and speaking from a wide variety of roles; [his] ideal orator is not unitary but multiple" (179).

As I have argued, the driver for Cicero's claims for rhetoric is his understanding of the Roman Republic as a site of perpetual conflict.[1] Many modern scholars have taken Cicero's talk about *concordia* and *consensus* in politics as evidence that they are the primary goal or end of politics. But this misses Cicero's view of Roman history as a cycle of antagonism where

[1]Joy Connolly, *The Life of Roman Republicanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concord is always only temporarily achieved. By the nature of the republic itself, elite overreach or popular discontent always interrupts concord. This is the point of the second book of *De republica* and the reason Cicero makes such dramatic claims in all his rhetorical writings and letters about the agonistic, even dangerous nature of oratory. Antagonism being the inescapable defining dynamic of republican politics, the good orator's job—and the goal of republican politics—is to navigate perpetual conflict politically, avoiding physical violence, because violence begets fear, and fear constrains freedom, the only thing held in common by the republic's two parts, the haves and the have-nots.

The orator is seen in public; his style reflects the plurality of the community, and he fights. In each context, Goodman rightly argues, memorizing systems and learnable codes of speech is never enough to prepare the orator or serve his needs. Further, even if it worked, such an approach is antipolitical. To speak plainly, like Julius Caesar (not to mention Trump and other modern Caesarians), is to erase nuance, difference, dissonance. It radically misrepresents the eternally conflicted, agonistic republic.

Here a very important and rather startling point emerges in Cicero's text and in Goodman's exposition. The orator, I have argued, "fashions his virtuosic self-display in active response to the communal gaze."[2] His value and sense of self are utterly entangled with his status in public. No orator exists in isolation from the community, and this awareness is ideally reflected in his style. We can put it this way: he is not entirely his own man. Cicero's high-style orator is a "paradoxical unity of multiple possibilities—resistance and consensus, improvisation and institution, habituated to and expressive of the irreducible plurality of the world."[3] He is, to quote Etienne Balibar, "unthinkable as an isolated individual, for it is his active participation in politics that makes him exist. But he cannot on that account be merged into a total collectivity."[4] He must speak with authentic passion on behalf of others, necessarily engendering dissonance in himself; a dissonance always to be moderated but not erased.

This emerges most clearly in *De oratore*, where Cicero sidesteps the notion of a perfectly unified self in favor of a discursively constituted subject who uses but does not rely on learnable codes, because he must transcend the norm, cultivating flexibility and responsiveness to external conditions and rewards. The orator must "taste" the senses of his audience; he must know human character through and through. This allows him to appeal to the communal sensibility of his listeners.[5]

[2]Ibid., 142.

[3]Ibid., 140.

[4]Etienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for a Philosophical Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55.

[5]Cicero, *De oratore*, in *Rhetorica*, ed. A. S. Wilkins, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922), 1.218, 223; 2.182–86, 337.

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To speak in conditions of pervasive conflict, as Goodman points out, is risky. It exposes the orator to contingency and fragility; it forces him to recognize his own internal divisions. Properly equipped with intellectual and affective resources, though, the speaker's plurality "permits a bridging, through speech, between himself and the plural community. This model of ethical formation proposes a durable, dialogic self capable of incorporating the necessary contradictions that arise as the subject shapes himself to understand, address, and persuade a multiplicity."[6]

Against scholars like Elaine Fantham and John Dugan who have explained Cicero's thematization of self-fashioning as the product of his desire to advance himself while minimizing the disadvantages of his status as *novus homo*, Goodman and I agree that Cicero's construction of himself in his rhetorical writing and speeches resonates with his representation of the orator in the rhetorical works as a political *exemplum*.[7]

Just as this struggle occurs in the body politic, so it occurs in and on the individual body: the body's dynamic energy must be channeled by the authority of reason and practical wisdom, in a way that the performance remains authentic and the speaker's emotions are visible and communicable to others.

> The charm of popular appeal must be woven into the speaker's sense of himself as constantly accommodated to the public gaze, constantly put to the test in the public arena. His performance speaks to the eternal struggle that constitutes the republican order. But the lawcourt and assembly are more than pressure valves for class struggle. By the forceful logic of Cicero's association of resolving violence with refoundation, the republic is repeatedly reconstituted through the mediated, channeled violence of forensic and deliberative argument.[8]

Goodman's emphasis on risk can be aligned with his thinking about embodiment and authenticity, in light of his hope to say something to our contemporary scene. He argues that "Cicero's model of eloquence stresses the uncertainty and instability of the orator's persuasive tools and involves the orator in necessary confrontations with vulnerability and failure" (14). He later remarks that "an ailing public sphere produces political marketing and 'tribal' citizens; a healthy one, we might hope, generates something like the self-risking orator and the fluid, self-risking citizen, capable of answering Paul's question—*What if I became someone else?*—with a bold openness, a willingness to contain multitudes, at least potentially, at least successively" (194, emphasis original).

But risk, vulnerability, failure, multiplicity, and fluidity mean different things for different people. When women speak, when (to use Charles

[6]Connolly, *Life of Roman Republicanism*, 147.
[7]Ibid., 145.
[8]Ibid., 148.

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Mills's preferred vocabulary) nonwhite people speak, when they take risks and speak in others' voices, they pay a far higher price than white men do.[9] These citizens do not experience the full freedoms of risk and experiment that white men have and that Goodman praises. Goodman knows this but I want to push harder on him, and on all of us, to center this as the kind of problem that must be answered, not just acknowledged and passed over as work for another day.

One avenue of response lies in Goodman's final quotation, from Demosthenes's speech *On the Crown*. Demosthenes describes the moment in the late fourth century BCE when the Athenians learned of their utter defeat by Philip of Macedon. "The herald asked, 'Who wishes to speak?' No one came forward" (170). The herald's question draws attention to one of the main issues Goodman addresses in his chapter on Burke, who praises stable institutions of government. If it seems unlikely that we will speedily erase the deeply seated prejudices that so many people (men and women) hold against women's and nonwhite people's bodies and voices, we should concentrate on understanding and improving the institutional conditions of speech—who wishes to speak, who gets to speak, and where, with what preparation and with what coverage, and empowered by what financial backing.

[9]Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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