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Restraint and Emotion in Cicero's *De Oratore*

Per Fjelstad

In *De Oratore* Cicero has the revered orator Crassus ask, “Who then is the man who gives people a thrill? whom do they stare at in amazement when he speaks? who is interrupted by applause? who is thought to be so to say a god among men?” (1942a, III.53). Crassus, who is asking his companions to think about emotional energy in speech, goes on, “It is those whose speeches are clear, explicit, and full, perspicuous in matter and language, and who in actual delivery achieve a sort of rhythm and cadence—that is, whose style I call ‘ornate’.”

Several things are striking about the passage. First, it resolves its inquiry by invoking the concept of *ornatus*, a word widely used to translate the Greek idea of *kosmos* (DiLorenzo 1978). Cicero thus refers to a quality that joins the ideas of cosmic order, physical beauty, and earthly power. Second, the passage is delivered in the midst of Crassus’s discussion of the fourth rhetorical canon, that referring to the elaboration of ideas in language, of selecting levels of style and modes of verbal embellishment. Third, the passage ranges across the entire field of rhetorical art, at least as indexed by the scope of the canons. The performative quality directly under discussion, that which gives people a thrill—initially associated with the Theophrastian virtues of style that Crassus has been enumerating, that is, clarity and explicitness—quickly is expanded to include copiousness of invention, perspicuity of language, and energetic beauty in delivery. Cicero’s Crassus thus discusses a performative dynamic that appears to govern rhetoric as a whole.

As the other characters in the dialogue discuss this quality of speech, which engages listeners emotionally and transforms their experience of the present, they bound beyond the preliminary categories of their analysis and describe a power of speech that is aesthetic and philosophical. As the

narrator of this dialogue, Cicero eventually associates the possibility of emotional transformation with a quality of performance we might identify as graceful or urbane. Cicero suggests that performative style can rise above particular details, conventions, and rules of standard rhetorical instruction. Ornate speech is, in sum, emotionally transformative. In detail, however, how does Cicero theorize this grand ability? What goals, resources, or models does he invoke?

This essay argues that Cicero's theory of *ornatus* insists an orator display emotions relevant to the performance while responding to the need of listeners to hear emotional expression against a backdrop of relative calm. In developing this analysis, I claim that the dialogic format of *De Oratore* allows insight to emerge from juxtaposed perspectives, that Cicero's ideal of *ornatus* contains a limiting threshold for performative exuberance, and that his examples of emotional engagement illustrate the importance of context and aesthetic restraint.

Theoretical tensions as sources for synthetic insight

Theoretical tensions in Cicero's *De Oratore* are instructive. While Cicero's effort to reconcile Isocratean practice with Aristotelian teleology ultimately makes for a rough fit, the juxtaposition of those understandings within the dialogue also generates new insight, even about limits for rhetorical theory itself. Referring to this mode of theorizing as "ironic eloquence," Michael Leff holds that "through this merger of theory and practice, the rival conceptions of oratory as systematic art and oratory as synthetic practice coalesce within the text, the two perspectives interacting to produce a development that incorporates both" (1986, 323).

A similar theoretical tension can be observed in *De Oratore* regarding the prospects and significance of emotional engagement in oratorical performance. In discussing the practices of emotional oratory Cicero draws on three distinct intellectual sources: a quasi-enthymematic model of emotional engagement, in which an orator need not share or display the sought-after emotional response; a mimetic theory of theatrical performance (that is, a typology of tonal and gestural "moods"); and a latent theory of "authenticity," according to which that which is being theatrically displayed is not "fakely" fictional, but somehow genuine.

The conflicting theories suggest possibilities, rather than limit or challenge each other's validity. Thus, the gaps between theoretical orienta-

tions remain productive in their juxtapositions of plausibly incompatible theories. For instance, what shifts between modes of emotional engagement are advisable? Are there times when it is wise to demonstrate or display emotional moods, not only in "role plays" but also as emotions that a speaker presents as his or her own? Surely such emotional display matters, though not necessarily in the same way for the entire presentation. Undoubtedly there are times, even in the dynamics of theater, when the main performer, the narrator, or even the spectator-critic effectively plays the "straight man," the person who tells enough of a story that listeners discover an emotional response to it, but who does not himself perform, in the telling, the supposedly "correct" emotional response. The "straight man" instead leaves a kind of emotional (and rhetorical) vacuum into which attending audience members inevitably are drawn. As in the Aristotelian enthymeme, this mode of theatrical representation gives audience members the pleasure of discovering and applying the appropriate emotion "on their own." Just as in the case of the enthymeme, this sense of a discovered attitude or opinion can be key to the rhetorical force of the performance.

While Cicero does not explore this possible nuance in any of the characters' individual contributions, the dialogic format of his exposition allows these questions to emerge regardless. Amongst these one might ask, What is the range or palette of emotional representation that stands for the rhetorical resources available to the orator? Even more critically, what guides the theatrical interplay between these modes of emotional evocation in giving audiences not only pleasure but also, occasionally, urgency in the emotional responses they experience. As in the case of verbal "embellishments," the key may be in providing performative relief, with background neutrality or narrative equanimity, to balance out the otherwise urgent emotional intensity.

The performative value of *Varietas*

The significance of stylistic variation in oratory is widely reported and frequently associated with Ciceronian theory. Augustine, for example, describes and recommends performative variation as the shift from one level of style to another. This, he states, alleviates the potential of boredom for listeners (1995, IV.51). At first glance, Augustine seems to recommend change simply for the sake of change, that one keep the activity of speech moving, never letting it rest in any one place too long, regardless of the

particular place or mode of speech for that rest. He urges variation amongst levels of diction, for example, "For when a speech is [oversaturated by] one style, it does not keep the listener's attention."

Yet the explanation that Augustine gives for performative variation goes beyond that basic principle and is reminiscent of Cicero's advice that emotionally charged speech be used sparingly and only in carefully constructed contexts. Thus, according to Augustine, when listeners are addressed in the grand style, their feelings are excited to a "high pitch," at which level they can be kept only for a short while. He elaborates, "If one were to try to lift higher that which is already high, we would notice instead the pitch falling on its own accord because it could not be sustained any longer." Thus, advises Augustine, by "interspersing matter which requires rather the subdued style, a pleasing return can be made to the subject calling for grand expression" (IV. 51). Hence it is that the grand style of diction, if it has to be continued for some time, must not be used alone, but must be varied by the interspersion of the other styles.

Augustine describes something here more targeted and strategic than mere variation. He recognizes the exceptional value for preachers of speech that *heightens* and *excites* feeling. It is after all, he claims, the grand style that one uses for the most important goals, like moving listeners to repentance or moral action. Yet this resource, the grand style, can lose its potency much more speedily than the other styles, particularly the subdued style. Hence for this resource to be effective at all the need is that much greater that the speaker color preceding parts of the presentation neutrally and with subtlety. Thus the generally valuable principle of variation takes on an even more specialized function here, for it prepares the mood and creates a context for the grand style to be maximally poignant. Augustine hereby reiterates a Ciceronian understanding of the power of *ornatus*: speech in its most aesthetically powerful form must excite the senses and emotions but not flood them.

The work of Elaine Fantham (1988) helps us see in Cicero's *De Oratore* a still finer treatment of this idea of balance and context-setting. Fantham identifies Cicero's theme of *varietas*, particularly in theorizing discourse that transforms perceptions for listeners, as key to Cicero's understanding of the oratorical virtue of *ornatus*. For Fantham, several attendant inflections in Cicero's discussion of the idea fill out its meaningfulness for practicing orators. First, Cicero associates *varietas* with ideas of physical pleasure, linking it to words like *lepos* and *venustas* (Fantham 1988, 279). Second, Cicero conceives of *varietas* as a matter of performative

functionality. Thus while he does not reject the use of “applied ornament,” he does distinguish such stylistic “decoration” from style that permeates a whole discourse, and he assesses the appropriateness of both by their functionality in keeping listeners attentive and moving them to action (276). Third, Cicero regards *varietas* in these key passages as rhetorical action with *negative force*, in other words, mainly as a mode of tempering or qualifying potential excess. When using cognates of *varietas* in this particular way, Cicero links the idea with *intermissio* (relief) or *reprehensio* (restraint) (277). Thus the ability of the speaker to vary a performance becomes intoned with the rhetorical value of slowing down, when the temptation might be to go too fast, or of toning down a part of a presentation, when temptation might lure a lesser speaker to flood the audience with verbal embellishments or excessive energy. Fourth, Cicero’s usage of *varietas* to describe restraint highlights the fact that humans, in particular the human ear, enjoy not only change (*metabole*), but a quality of change (277). In other words, not only do people enjoy the experience of variation as speakers shift amongst styles of address or when they introduce irregularities in the diction or rhythm of their sentences, but certain momentarily pleasing registers of oratorical performance also can satiate experience and actively turn off an audience. Thus to keep listeners from reacting negatively to cloying sweetness or unceasing bravado, the speaker must recognize these modes of stimulation and remember that audiences also find pleasure in the stepping down of stylistic intensity in discourse.

The paraphrase of Cicero in which Fantham describes this particular quality of discourse is as follows: “Success in speaking depends on shade and depth to increase by contrast the prominence of its brilliant features. . . . Like a vintage wine, a speech should be rich and appealing with firmness and astringency [a quality that Fantham claims is applied here for the first time in Latin criticism], not with sickly sweetness” (277). According to Fantham, the danger of overstimulation marks a specific limit of *ornatus* as a practical ideal.

Restraint, too, in emotional display

Now, although Crassus examines the power of *ornatus* mainly while discussing the fourth canon, that is, regarding style and the verbal embellishment of ideas in language, the implications of *ornatus* spread beyond that

particular topic of teaching. In the remainder of this essay I argue that the metaphor of *ornatus* serves as a unifying key for the whole of Cicero's rhetorical theory and that his particular concern about the recklessness of excessive embellishment is a topic to which he repeatedly returns in examples of oratory that heighten and engage emotions.

The actual context within which Crassus discusses *ornatus*, at least in its grandest and most philosophical sense, is in one of two sequential digressions that take him away from his stated purpose and outline. After discussing two aspects of style, purity, and clarity, which he initially dismissed as hardly needing to be examined, Crassus prepares to address the first of the remaining two topics, seemingly more weighty, those of *ornatus* and *aptus*. Yet precisely at this point, Crassus embarks on a digression about the history of philosophy and the separation by Socrates of wisdom from eloquence, in response to which Crassus insists that the issue should not be so much which school of philosophy is correct or true, but which is "the most fully akin to the orator." Clearly the scope of Crassus's discussion expands here well beyond the small matters of purity and clarity in Latin diction. It is precisely here, after this first lengthy digression, that Crassus launches into his animated discussion about style and its relation to emotional engagement. He only later retraces his steps, finally to treat the subject of *ornatus* somewhat scholastically and dryly, in a discussion of metaphor and other verbal figures. By its placement in the dialogue, Crassus's discussion of *ornatus* clearly looks beyond the particular canon assigned to him by the group in their programmatic dialogue. When he does discuss the range and limits of *ornatus*, he clearly points toward an understanding of what is important generally in the art of rhetoric (c.f. Cicero 1942a, III.21; III.120–43).

Then, in the second digression, immediately following the first, Crassus links a comprehensive sensitivity to *ornatus* with emotional engagement. Ornate speech which, among other effects, shall "possess the requisite amount of feeling and pathos," is a quality of performance that is not formulaic or a matter of arrangement, but must "be visible throughout the structure" of the speech (III.96). Crassus illustrates this with the image of lights strategically placed along a street for decoration during a celebration (Fantham 1988, 276). He then explores various examples of sensuous experience, from contemporary painting practices to the effects of perfume, to argue that style, as it works in oratory, must be calculated to hold the attention of an audience, in fact, "not only to give them pleasure but also to do so without giving them too much of it" (Cicero 1942a, III.97). Once he

develops this idea, both by analogy and by illustration from speeches, Crassus concludes that while "our orator shall have ornament and charm . . . , at the same time his charm must be severe and substantial, not sweet and luscious" (III.103). Thus in the all-important function of arousing the emotions of listeners, the orator must refrain from excessive or overplayed performance.

This emphasis on emotional balance and restraint also is pointed out by the various characters in the different examples they discuss. There is, of course, a specific section in the early dialogue during which Antonius explicitly discusses the topic of emotional appeal. Following Aristotle, he identifies lines of argument that can arouse and calm emotions, such as wrath, fear, and jealousy. In the midst of this discussion, Antonius recalls a particular speech he gave in defense of Manius Aquilius, an alleged instigator of a popular revolt (II.195–200). In his defense, Antonius displayed to the Court grief and anguish over the fate of the defendant, even tore open the defendant's tunic to show physical scars, all as part of a performance that eventually won an acquittal. Antonius concluded from this story that there are times when one should not be skimpy in emotional display, also that those emotions, while magnified theatrically, needed also to be genuine and authentic.

So far, so good. Yet the response to Antonius in the dialogue by Sulpicius, the actual prosecutor in that case who lost the verdict, further accentuates the principle of variation by which Antonius succeeded in presenting an emotional display while at the same time maintaining his credibility and keeping his audience engaged and alert as listeners. Sulpicius recalls having had an odd response to Antonius's opening display of distress and empathy. "[J]ust as I was deciding that you had merely succeeded in making people think intimate relationship a possible excuse for your defending a wicked citizen,—lo and behold!—so far unsuspected by other people, . . . you began to wriggle imperceptibly into your famous defence . . . of an incensed Roman People, whose wrath, you urged, was not wrongful, but just and well-deserved" (II.203).

Two observations by Sulpicius here are interesting: Antonius planned and performed a transformation in emotional tone, and the shift he made was from a display of his own emotion to an argument that the audience share a sense of outrage with the Roman people as a whole. Even in Antonius's effort to explain the authenticity of his emotional displays, he and Sulpicius in their joint recollection of the event confirm the aesthetic value of surprise, depth, and variation in that emotional engagement.

A further illustration, though from a different work, shows even more vividly the extent to which emotional representation is best approached with artistic restraint. In *De Partitione Oratoria*, Cicero comments that a speaker may inflect opinion (*inflexione sermonis*) so that even when praising another or disparaging himself, he in fact is making a more subtle point. This could be the case of a speaker using irony. A possible inference of consciously restrained delivery in such a situation, according to Cicero, is that the speaker shows his civility and generous nature (*comitate fieri magis quam vanitate*) (1942b, 22). Thus the potentially glaring quality of irony is tempered and made more palatable if the speaker stylistically downplays the overt expression of implied emotion. In a sense, audience members then feel that the emotional interpretation of the message is something they independently apply to it. Much like the enthymeme, then, such restraint or stylistic sublimation of emotional meaning allows for audiences to perceive themselves as active participants in the creation of oratorical meaning.

Conclusion

The argument of this essay functions as a preliminary inquiry. It shows that Cicero juxtaposes distinct and sometimes conflicting recommendations concerning effective emotional engagement in oratory, that his theory of performative style cautions against excessiveness, and that he recommends a similar caution against effusive and unvaried emotional display. In sum, the orator who gives audiences a thrill, who appears before them almost as a god, whose style of speaking is ample and ornate, this speaker will keep the emotional energy of the discourse fluid and changing. He will not cheapen that energy by riding it too far or too simplistically, but instead will give proportion and depth, light and shade, to the emotional meanings of a message.

In a very general sense this analysis also prompts further inquiry into the scope and focus of Ciceronian theory. First, the inquiry suggests that the aesthetic ideal of *ornatus* serves as a global key, a signature contribution, for interpreting Cicero's rhetorical theory. The associations and limitations to rhetorical practice that Cicero highlights in his treatment of *ornatus* illuminate his larger theory of rhetoric as a philosophical art, as a practice and calling that goes beyond the textbook traditions. Second, his specific conception of *ornatus*, both as regards its philosophical signifi-

cance and its practical limitations, might effectively be analyzed against the backdrop of the dispute during Cicero's lifetime over the relative merits of the Asiatic versus Attic styles. In other words, Cicero's theory makes a case for verbal exuberance, even theatrical pyrotechnics, as long as those flashes of emotional performance also are supported and contextualized by more measured and steady discourse. Finally, Cicero's position that emotional display should be tempered could represent a conceptual synthesis of content-oriented invention with the mimetic practice of displaying emotions relevant to the content. While Cicero recognizes, in the character of Antonius, that no fire will start without a spark, he also recognizes that a well-set fire needs only one good spark, and that listeners will gain more satisfaction by supplying the missing emotional "premises" themselves than by having them always dramatically performed for them. A good fire, the kind of fire that burns *ornatissimi* in a city, will feed itself quickly and supply its own ongoing ignition. Overall, Cicero's theory asks us to consider the prospect of a thriving city, a cultured populace, and the delicate maneuver of starting and controlling a fire in such a context, a fire that is and remains a pleasing spectacle. Emotional modulation would appear to be an aesthetic competence for kindling and keeping that kind of fire.

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