Academic Ambitions: Cicero, the *Persona* of the Philosopher, and Roman Elite Status

It is difficult to find a treatment of Cicero – from the first century to the present – that can gaze approvingly at all of his works. The *consensus opinio* holds that he was the preeminent jurist of his time and perhaps the highest exemplar of Latin prose composition, yet Juvenal, as one voice among many, after quoting Cicero's effusive poem on his own consulship, proclaims that "he could have had contempt for the swords of Antony if he had said everything like that" (*Sat*. 10.123-4). There has been a longstanding and stark chasm sundering the rhetorical *opera* (both orations and letters), cast as political, public, valid, and useful, from the poetic and philosophical *opera*, cast as apolitical, private, dilatory, and vain. The philosophical works of the great orator have at times come under indifference and disdain similar to his poetic attempts, a devaluation that – but for the mass of otherwise unattested glimpses of ancient philosophy – might have damned his philosophic works to greater obscurity than they now suffer. Cicero himself advances – but crucially does not assert – multiple claims for the validity of his philosophical efforts during his forced absence from his place within the *cursus honorum* (*Acad*. I.11). Many treatments of this aspect of Cicero's work – taking Cicero as claiming ingenuously to have nothing political in play – confront questions of how transparent a window the author is to the matter he claims to bring into Latin or of what place within this genre the author can claim. These are certainly crucial questions in the examination of those philosophical schools and tenets that Cicero treats; however, it may be argued that such issues are minimally connected to the fundamental question of what Cicero's rhetorical or private aim is in these extensive compositions. Generic concerns and issues of intertextuality are doubtless in play, yet

the prime ambiguity that shrouds the meaning of these texts is to be sought in the created character of the author within his work. The text thus demands of its reader an evaluation of not merely literary merit or translational accuracy, but rather of motive and authorial *persona.*

As a first step in this investigation, it is appropriate to perform a close reading of the claims to authorial *auctoritas* that Cicero advances in the prologue of the *Academica*. Cicero sets the composition of philosophical texts in opposition to all the *multa officia* of the political man in Rome: candidature, magistracies, legal cases, not only the care, but even a certain management of the republic (Acad. I.11). Only when he is no longer held *implicatus* and *constrictus* in such concerns is he free for an occupation that he relegated to the reading of the occasional book prior to his political castration by the triumvirate. Next, Cicero employs the twin bereavements of his daughter's death and his own estrangement from power as pretexts for seeking philosophy as a *medicina* for his suffering. The *topos* of *philosophia* as *medicina* has a wide distribution within the genre, yet Cicero lets slip in the next few clauses a series of potential explanations for his activity of somewhat higher plausibility: that it is the most upright use of his *otium*, that it is most appropriate for his time of life, that it is most consonant to his worthy deeds, that nothing is more useful for rusticating Roman citizens, or finally that he sees nothing else that he is able to do.

It is upon the employment of *otium* that all of these putative rationales depend, and it is within this question that a solution to Cicero's literary program can be sought. What one chose to do in the tracts of *otium* was a central ethical problem in the political life of the Roman power elite. Cicero reveals that he still conceptualizes himself in public rather than private terms by showing lingering interest in asserting that he is utilizing his *otium* is the most *honestum* manner allowed by the political situation. In

some sense one may safely consent to the author's assertion that the writing of philosophical works constitutes the extreme choice of a political man deprived of all other options, yet, by analogy, although there are many unequally easy or felicitous ways of going to Rome, it cannot be asserted that travel by foot over the fields, given that it would be preferable to no traveler, by necessity would constitute a qualitatively different sort of activity than for example travel in a sedan chair along the *Via Appia* merely because it is not the preferred or most effective mode of travel. Further, when he writes concerning the *ultimum bonum*, the *sapiens*, or any philosophical construct, Cicero lays claim not simply to an *honestum* use of his *otium* but in a composite manner to *honestissima virtus* itself. The author ultimately formulates each assertion on the nature of the *ultimum bonum* into a balanced assertion of his own moral worth (and consequent right to political *auctoritas*) in comparison to the deficient moral status of those who have deprived him of his station in the republic (and their consequent lack of a just claim to their *potestas*.)

It is reasonable to infer that the intended audience of these works would have been fully cognizant of Cicero's candid views on the legitimacy of the triumvirs and of their respective moral standings. No Caesarian might be expected to fall in line with the subtext of this subversive discourse, but this fact in no way mitigates the assertion that the intended audience, arguably the non-aligned members of the senatorial order, could be expected to recognize a veiled though pungently political message interspersed within *prima facie* mundane adaptations of Greek philosophical text. If the status of resistance literature can be granted to the *Academica*, and even more clearly to the *De Officiis* or *De Finibus Bonorum Malorumque*, the reader may expect themes to recur throughout the philosophical works consonant to the political stance of the author. Consequent to the stated goal of supporting this assertion, it will be necessary to

examine the manner in which Cicero deploys politically charged philosophical and ethical discourse throughout his corpus of texts: oratorical, epistolary, and philosophical.

The literary persona constructed by Cicero can be readily detected in the oration *Pro Caelio*, in which the orator asserts the probity of his client by covertly asserting his own superior moral stance in the act of standing in judgment of the putative nefarious activities of his defendant's accusers. Even the ridiculous impersonation of the venerable Appius Claudius Caecus, a morally impeccable ancestor of the source of the accusation against his client, provides Cicero with the opportunity to do overtly and transparently what he consistently does covertly and obliquely. The crucial observation is that both the disapproving ancestor and Cicero the advocate are masks assumed for the occasion and the particular rhetorical needs of the moment. It was a recurrent *locus communis* in ancient literary circles that the only effective art was that which did not appear to be art. This essential point is consonant with the assertion that rhetoric need not be blatant to be effective, and indeed could be argued to be all the more powerful the less obtrusively its message insinuates itself into the beliefs of the auditor. In certain circumstances of politically perilous junctures, this form of subtlety would be more necessary than merely useful; direct communication of one's meaning could bring swift death.

In his most overt and ultimately costly attacks on those with extra-constitutional power, Cicero charges Antony with an early youth spent as a *vulgare scortum* in comparison to which his later passive relationship with Curio constituted being in a *matrimonio stabili et certo* (*Phil*. 2.18). The crucial import of these forms of invective is that the one who employs them does not merely besmirch the moral status and consequent right to political *auctoritas* of his victims, on the contrary, he makes a

parallel claim to virtues diametrically opposed to the vices that he castigates in others. It is arguable that the sage may have no need to cast stones, but the contestant in the political arena is no sage. The mask of the moral censor, the *persona* of moral goodness is an inseparable element of the constellation of qualifications for participation in elite power. Thus, when the author takes this mask upon himself, even in the overtly disinterested capacity of philosophical author, the charge of the act is at the root level political. The act becomes even more transparent when one considers the time of Cicero's last stand (political and soon to be physical) was also the time of composition for the *De Officiis*, a work detailing not the duties of man in general but of the statesman is specific, i.e. the member of the senatorial elite.[1]

Further, the mask of philosopher frequently drop by certain degrees as in the instance when, after noting that there is no one so "*cupidus in perspicienda cognoscendaque rerum natura*" so anxious that he "*dinumerare… stellas aut metri mundi magnitudinem*" that he would not relinquish and even cast aside all such studies if there should be a need to defend or assist their fatherland, Cicero bluntly states: "from these facts it is understood that the duties of justice, which pertain to the advantage of men, are to be placed before the studies and the duties of knowing (scientia)" (*De Officiis* I.154-55). The same substance beneath the illusion can be detected in the actions of Cicero the political man, who did in fact cast aside his studies as soon as he perceived an opportunity to engage overtly with the needs of his fatherland, as can be noted in the attacks on Antony quoted above from the Philippic orations. The critical distinction must still be made that the studies chosen by Cicero were not the pure sciences of his *exemplum* but rather the practical and political arena of ethical philosophy; again, it is not the identity, the *persona*, of the natural philosopher that is desired. Nothing could be more apolitical or

[1] Cf. Long, p.214.

irrelevant to Cicero's program. The mask of the ethical philosopher is one facet of the orator's lifelong role: *consularis vir, princeps senatus, pater patriae*.

Anderson first developed the theory of *personae* as a means of separating the many contradictory voices in the genre of satire from the authentic authorial voice in *Essays on Roman Satire*; when coupled with the observation of Maud Gleason that masculinity (male identity) among the Roman elite was a commodity under perpetual construction through performance in *Making Men Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*, the concept of the authorial *persona* as a means toward the creation of elite identity can be applied across genre and circumstance. The exhibition of oratorical acumen in a society where "masculine identity was an achieved state" was a primary route to the acquisition of male gender and was directly implicated and compulsory in the exercise of the varied offices and commands of the *cursus honorum*.[2] The entire person and deportment (*persona/habitus*) were under perpetual scrutiny and menaced by an ever-present threat of assault; the "mere fact of biological sex" was a guarantor of nothing.[3] A man's walk must be like this, his hands must move like that, his eyes must give off the requisite "indefinable courageous gleam."[4]

The erudition of the "real" man was another form of "symbolic capital," another weapon for the political struggle to be boasted of *ad nausium* or mocked mercilessly if asserted to be absent in one's enemies.[5] It must be noted that the real man in question can only be a member of the Roman senatorial elite; the education, actions, and speech of a man separated from the senatorial *cursus* were of no moment. From these assertions emerges the image of the orator as political animal, who brings his skill to

[2] Gleason, p. 159.
[3] Gleason, p. 162.
[4] Gleason, p. 61.
[5] Gleason, p. 140.

bear in many arenas (legal oratory, political office, literary composition) in quest of one goal: the creation of male identity, i.e. political *auctoritas* – social position within the class of the senatorial elite. Thus, crucial to the unpacking of Cicero's philosophical works is the comprehension that the authorial voice is fundamentally multiple and remains, even at moments of apparent candor or academic disinterest, a construct with a rhetorical aim.

In the midst of a seemingly sterile discussion of the role of *adsensio* (assent) in mediating between sense perceptions and action, Cicero opines, "whatever is in our power, in the man who assents to nothing it will not exist" (*Acad*. II.38). The nearly verbalized statement that the man who refuses to choose what he believes has no free will is eminently vital to the core political issues of the moment when the author was claiming to be in effective retirement. Cicero continues with the rhetorical question, "where, therefore, is virtue, if nothing resides in ourselves." When united with the foregoing assertion that an "animal is not able to withhold approval from a perspicuous object cast in its path," an inescapable dialectic progression is set in motion: any being must assent to the obvious, to maintain one's status as a free moral agent one must choose the believe something about each sense presentation, and by necessity the final outcome is that the individual must act on each choice to attain *virtus*. The literary frame given to the *Academica* serves as a model for the mass of Cicero's philosophical output, and its isolated and imaginary flavor augments the seductive diversionary tactics deployed by the author. Irrespective of this frame and even of the surface narrative of the text itself, a close reading of import of Cicero's logic reveals the potent political charge of the work. Taken is sequence: anti-constitutional power has been perspicuously seized by certain persons, the individual must choose to believe something about this percept, and in consequence to the demands of *virtus* the

individual must act on that judgmental choice. In such a manner, the superficially apolitical tenets of the various schools can take on an all-too-real consequence in action rather than theory.

If it is conceded via the forgoing demonstration that even the most esoteric philosophical constructs are inseparable from action and consequence, then what may be detected across the philosophical works of Cicero is a fabric of interlocked, although not seamlessly harmonious, threads of argument coalescing into a fairly unitary tapestry constituting the socio-political manifesto of the author. Again, it is not Cicero or his real actions that are seen reflected in this tapestry; it is the *persona* of the author as member of the Roman power elite that is worked into the warp and weft. Much as is the case for the recent photo-mosaic technique of building up an image from a mass of much smaller images with the requisite color ratios and orientations, the source texts chosen by Cicero for translation and adaptation may be argued to have gone through a highly selective process of selection and formatting prior to inclusion in his rhetorical uber-project. If, as has been argued above, the aim of the author is not simple transmission of pre-existing thought and expression, but rather the encapsulation of his own political *persona* both overtly and covertly within the ostensibly academic periods of intricate Latinity that he weaves into these works, then the question of to what extent Cicero distorted the interwoven fabric of ancient philosophy in his conscious acts of omission and commission.

Plato, never a supporter of the Sophists or of their art, intones, "oÈd' êra didaskalikÚw ı =Ætvr §st‹n dikasthr€vn te ka‹ t«n êllvn ˆxlvn dika€vn te p°ri ka‹ éd€kvn, éllå pistikÚw mÒnon" – the rhetor is instructive in terms of both law courts and mobs but concerning just and unjust matters, he is merely persuasive – a forceful attempt to

notionally separate philosophy from rhetoric (*Gorg*. 455a). Even in the case of Plato himself the orator with his agenda is never far from the surface, but his critique of the Sophists is valid when applied to Cicero as well. Given that a strong thread of personal bias and conviction runs through his overtly apolitical works, a final answer as to whether Cicero skewed the meaning of the authors that he translated/adapted may be irretrievable due to the loss of those primary sources of his philosophical text; however, what may be distilled from the *De Officiis et al*. is not merely the ideal philosopher or Roman statesman, but rather the form of Cicero's assertion to personal meaning within Roman elite culture. This attempted juncture of philosophical acumen and authorship to elite status is his crucial innovation. The claim to arbitrate between philosophic schools and to differentiate and define systems of value, belief, and action is an assumption of moral identity superior to those under scrutiny. In the enactment of authorship, Cicero recapitulates the literary ambitions of his youthful self, the one who translated the poetic natural philosophy of the *Phaenomena* of Aretus, and of the wretchedly self-eulogizing politician who sang *de consulatu suo* when more accomplished poets shunned the task. The cumulative *persona* constructed by Cicero in the philosophical works is not to be separated from that of the orations or indeed from that of his public performance as statesman; Cicero is more subtle than Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but his goal as author is no less the preservation of his political *dignitas*.

For the purposes of this argument, it is crucial to recognize that political ambition need not be apparent in every period of the text in question; indeed, there may be extended sections that appear nothing more than *verbatim* translations or adaptations of prior works. This fact in no manner impedes the argument of this paper, since the act of philosophic creation itself, and not merely the minute phrasing of particular clauses, is the unit of Cicero's academic ambition. It is no grammarian or pedant that Cicero

aspires to seem; his interlocutors are the great lights of his version of Roman intellectual history, and he himself is to be the Roman Plato and more. Further, as was the case for Plato, the creation of a work on the *politeia* constitutes not a mere artistic or intellectual movement of mind and pen, but rather a forceful, even violent, action of the author as political animal.

When Cicero near his last extremity chose to write discourses on philosophy, just as war is said to be diplomacy by other means, he carried on the struggle for auctoritas through literature. Andrew Bell notes in "Cicero and the Spectacle of Power" that the public enactment of political authority, what the author terms the "spectacle of power," is of vital importance to the Roman Republic because the facade of power is – to a great extent – its reality. It was necessary for the ambitious member of the elite to make optimal use of every occasion to enact his power on the public "stage" in the *Forum*, the law courts, and even within lines of polished text. Removed from his habitual *locus* of power, Cicero was in desperate need of some trope to perpetuate the enactment of his power. As Bell notes later in his essay, the appearance of *dignitas* "was a liability in the absence of supporting claims to distinction."[6] Rather than augmenting his *auctoritas*, the former accomplishments of Cicero were weights around his neck compelling him to find novel means of continuing his performance.

Confronted finally with the utter negation of his political role, Cicero chose not acquiescence in the face of the inevitable but rather a veiled activism in his philosophy. As Long observed in the *De Officiis*, the overall program of Cicero's philosophical works can be viewed not as *medicina* for the self but for the state.[7] The author conjectures that Cicero's attempt to rejoin the sundered concepts of the *honestum* and the (personally)

[6] Bell, p. 15.
[7] Long, p. 217.

utile could be an attempt to "repair the instability" within a state where *gloria* (and its consequent power) had become separated from the *honestae actiones* that were once its source. The implications of this reasonable supposition are vast; again, the mask of the philosopher providing political *medicina* in the form of personal wisdom to the ailing state is one with Cicero's much loved role: *consularis vir*, *princeps senatus*, *pater patriae*

All philosophy is political; even the choice to be apolitical and refrain from action is political. By promoting an ethical system under which only the *honestum* is *bonum*, Cicero lays the groundwork for the same type of totalizing political philosophy that would soon result in the death of a dictator and further rounds of civil war. It is telling that the conspirators chose not to include Cicero in their plot; it may be that they had a clearer perspective on the dichotomy between Cicero as revealed through his carefully constructed literary *persona* on the stage of the hypothetical and Cicero as political man in the violent *milieu* of action and consequence that was Roman elite society in the final years of the Republic. In consequence of these observations, all interpretations of Cicero's transmission of earlier text and idea must be held provisionally, since, where there exist no exact *comparata* for the translations and adaptations of the author, the reader is cautioned by the arguments thus far advanced that Cicero represents nothing resembling an equitable and disinterested mirror for the positions of others authors, rather, the highly polished form of the philosophical works disguises some – perhaps unrecoverable – distortion of all that they reflect. To borrow from Cicero himself, our *perceptiones* of ancient philosophical schools and tenets in the mirror of his works may be strongly *probabiles* but ultimately not *perspicuae*.

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