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CAESAR'S *VENI VIDI VICI* AND PLUTARCH

In two papers, published in 2010 and 2012 respectively, and subsequently taken up, with minor changes, in his 2014 book *Plutarch and his Roman Readers*[1], Philip A. Stadter contends that both the quotation from Horace[2] and the mention and appraisal of Cicero's *Lucullus*[3] contained in Plutarch's *Life of Lucullus* proceed from a direct reading of the two Roman writers rather than from second-hand knowledge.

Though this position differs from the opinion more commonly held, it must be admitted that Stadter pleads his case with plausible arguments, though of course insufficient to attain certainty, as he himself is ready to admit[4].

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to discuss this matter. At the end of the second of these essays Stadter adds an appendix entitled *Plutarch's Aesthetic Appreciation of Latin,* treating the same problems discussed in a paper of mine published some years earlier[5].

Contrary to my contention, and to the opinion of most scholars, Stadter maintains that Plutarch's renouncing to compare Demosthenes and Cicero as orators for being avowedly unqualified to assess the stylistic merits achieved by Cicero in Latin, preceded by the remark about his having started to

[1] P.A. Stadter, *Plutarch's Latin Reading: the Case of Cicero's Lucullus*, *in:* L. Van der Stockt, F. Titchener, H.G. Ingenkamp, A. Pérez Jiménez (eds.), *Gods, Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch's Works. Studies Devoted to Professor Frederik E. Brenk by the International Plutarch Society,* Logan Utah 2010, 407-418; P.A. Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace (Luc. 39.5): but has he Read him?,* in: G. Bastianini, W. Lapini, M. Tulli, *Harmonia. Scritti in onore di Angelo Casanova,* Firenze 2012, II, 781-792. The first essay is taken up in P.A. Stadter, *Plutarch and his Roman Readers,* Oxford 2014, 130-138; the second *ibid*., 138-148.

[2] Plut. *Luc*. 39.5 στρατηγοῦ δέ ποτε φιλοτιμουμένου περὶ θέας καὶ χορῷ τινι κόσμον αἰτουμένου πορφυρᾶς χλαμύδας, ἀπεκρίνατο σκεψάμενος ἂν ἔχῃ δώσειν, εἶτα μεθ'ἡμέραν ἠρώτησεν αὐτὸν ὁπόσων δέοιτο. τοῦ δὲ ἑκατὸν ἀρκέσειν φήσαντος ἐκέλευεν λαβεῖν δὶς τοσαύτας. εἰς ὃ καὶ Φλάκκος ὁ ποιητὴς ἐπιπεφώνησε, ὡς οὐ νομίζοι πλοῦτον, οὗ μὴ τὰ παρορώμενα καὶ λανθάνοντα πλείονα τῶν φαινομένων ἐστί. Cf. Hor. *epist*. 1.6.40-46 *chlamydas Lucullus, ut aiunt, / si posset centum scaenae praebere rogatus, / "qui possum tot?" ait: "tamen et quaeram et quot habebo / mittam". Post paulo scribit sibi milia quinque / esse domi chalmydum: partem vel tolleret omnis. / Exilis domus est ubi non et multa supersunt / et dominum fallunt et prosunt furibus*.

[3] Plut. *Luc*. 42.3 σύγγραμμά γε πάγκαλον ἐποίησεν (scil. Κικέρων), ἐν ᾧ τὸν ὑπὲρ τῆς καταλήψεως λόγον Λευκόλλῳ περιτέθεικεν, αὑτῷ τὸν ἐναντίον· Λεύκολλος δ'ἀναγέγραπται τὸ βιβλίον.

[4] Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace,* 761: "clearly in such matters there can be no proof, only an evaluation of possibilities".

[5] A. Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin as a Means of Expression,* "Prometheus" 33, 2007, 156-166.

approach works in Latin only late in life[6] and having learned to understand the vocabulary through his familiarity with the (historical) subject matter, rather than the other way around – so that he was not in a condition to appreciate the fine points and the beauty of the language[7] – does not mean that "he could not notice obvious features of artistry in Latin"; on the contrary, according to Stadter, "his words assert that he could recognize and appreciate them, though not at a professional level"[8].

Plutarch does say that Latin must have its own beauty and features ornamenting the expression[9], and that he would consider it worthwhile to obtain a command of the language enabling to appreciate them, except that it is an uneasy task fit for those with more leisure and a younger age[10]. It is difficult to draw from these words of Plutarch's more than a working knowledge of the language, though surely he was aware of the fact that this language different from his own did possess some peculiar features and a distinctive beauty, which he avowedly was not qualified to grasp.

It is only within these limits that we may accept Stadter's position. At a time when Plutarch relied on his familiarity with the subject matter to understand the meaning of the words[11], he could hardly claim a comfortable command of the language, only lacking an advanced rhetorical training.

A confirmation may be gleaned from this very passage, where, after the "beauty" attributed to Latin, and before other general features, such as metaphors, arrangement of words, and some, non-specified, ornaments,

[6] According to Slater, *Plutarch's Latin Reading,* 414, the words of Plut. *Dem*. 2.2 ὀψέ ποτε καὶ πόρρω τῆς ἡλικίας (an expression indicating sixty years of age at Plut. *Aem*. 10.2) do not refer to the time of elementary training in Latin (which, according to him, began when Plutarch was a teenage boy), but to "frequent intercourse with cultured native speakers and the advanced training with a Roman rhetorician". This, however, is at odds with what Stadter writes on the following page (*Plutarch's Latin Reading,* 415), when he states that at the time he wrote this Plutarch lacked "the serious application to the principles of Latin rhetorical practice".

[7] Plut *Dem*. 2.2-3.1.

[8] Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace,* 789; Stadter, *Plutarch's Latin Reading,* 417.

[9] Plut. *Dem*. 2.4 κάλλους… καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, οἷς ὁ λόγος ἀγάλλεται. A more complete citation below, note 13.

[10] Plut. *Dem*. 2.4 χαρίεν μὲν ἡγούμεθα καὶ οὐκ ἀτερπές. ἡ δὲ πρὸς τοῦτο μελέτη καὶ ἄσκησις οὐ εὐχηρής, ἀλλ' οἵστισι πλείων τε σχολὴ καὶ τὰ τῆς ὥρας ἔτι [πρὸς] τὰς τοιαύτας ἐπιχωρεῖ φιλοτιμίας.

[11] Plut. *Dem*. 2.3 οὐ γὰρ οὕτως ἐκ τῶν ὀνομάτων τὰ πράγματα συνιέναι καὶ γνωρίζειν συνέβαινεν ἡμῖν, ὡς ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων,<ὧν> ἀμῶς γέ πως εἴχομεν ἐμπειρίαν, ἐπακολουθεῖν δι'αὐτὰ καὶ τοῖς ὀνόμασι. Though Stadter, *Plutarch's Latin Reading*, 415, is well aware of this, he nevertheless maintains that at this time Plutarch was quite comfortable with his understanding of Latin.

Plutarch mentions the characteristic that he appears to have considered the most peculiar to Latin[12]: τάχος, i.e. "rapidity", or rather "conciseness"[13].

Not that acknowledging this peculiarity of Latin does attest a special competence or originality of judgment. As is often the case with Plutarch's assessment of the eloquence of a number of Roman orators, which we'll presently mention, here he is adopting a ready-made stereotype. As I have shown elsewhere[14], the idea that the characteristics of a language mirror the peculiarities of the people speaking it was widespread in antiquity. Even within the Greek language itself Plutarch accepts the widespread opinion that the dialect spoken at Sparta was marked by a "laconism" that made it an effective means of expression[15]. The Romans themselves attributed "power to Latin and charm to Greek" – *Latinae linguae potentia aut Graecae gratia,* in the words of Seneca[16] –, with their fitting counterparts of *robur* and *subtilitas*[17]. Quintilian too contrasts the force and the weight of Latin and the suppleness and subtlety of Greek[18].

Plutarch, quite clearly, offers the same evaluation of the character of the Latin language. We have seen that, while avowing his inability to judge the fine points of Latin expression, he was aware that one of its outstanding features was τάχος, rapidity and conciseness[19]. Τάχος appears again in the report of a speech held at Athens by the Elder Cato, which was characterized not only by conciseness (βραχέως) but also by ὀξύτης, "sharpness" or "pointedness"[20]. Quite obviously, Plutarch, by emphasizing these features, accepted the idea of the power (Seneca's *potentia*) of Latin, at the same time

[12] It is hardly necessary to repeat what I have said in Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin,* 158; 163-164.

[13] Plut. *Dem*. 2.4 κάλλους δὲ Ῥωμαϊκῆς ἀπαγγελίας καὶ τάχους αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ μεταφορὰς ὀνομάτων καὶ ἁρμονίας καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, οἷς ὁ λόγος ἀγάλλεται.

[14] A. Setaioli, *Seneca e i Greci. Citazioni e traduzioni nelle opere filosofiche,* Bologna 1988, 11-16.

[15] Plut. *Lyc*. 19.5 ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ τὸν λόγον ὁρῶ τὸν Λακωνικὸν βραχὺν μὲν εἶναι δοκοῦντα, μάλιστα δὲ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐφικνούμενον καὶ τῆς διανοίας ἁπτόμενον τῶν ἀκροωμένων. An example of "Laconic" conciseness (the simpe "no" of the Spartans' reply to Philip's request to be received at Sparta) at Plut. *De garrul*. 21, 513A. Even at Rome the Laconic dialect was considered a fit vehicle for sentiments of fortitude: Sen. *ep*. 77.14.

[16] Sen. *Pol*. 2.6.

[17] Sen. *nat*. 2.50.1 *Graeca subtilitate;* 7.32.2 *Romani roboris*.

[18] Quint. 12.10.36 *non possumus esse tam graciles, simus fortiores; subtilitate vincimur, valeamus pondere*.

[19] Cf. above, note 13.

[20] Plut. *Cato mai*. 12.7 θαυμάσαι δέ φησι τοὺς Ἀθηναίους τὸ τάχος αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν ὀξύτητα· ἃ γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐξέφερε βραχέως, τὸν ἑρμηνέα μακρῶς καὶ διὰ πολλῶν ἐπαγγέλλειν.

pairing it with the Laconic dialect, perhaps with the afterthought that Greek and Latin were originally one and the same language[21].

Plutarch's occasional judgments on Roman orators[22] must be seen in the same light. According to Geiger[23] he has not read a single speech of any Roman orator, with the possible exception of Cicero's second *Philippic;* as far as Plutarch's appraisals are concerned, as Geiger puts it, "he was not averse to adopting ready made (*sic*) opinions without attempting to check them at first hand"[24]. I think I have identified one of these stereotypes, namely the cliché expressed by Seneca in words reportedly translating a Greek proverb: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita*[25]. As I have shown in that paper, in what Plutarch has to say on the eloquence of several Roman orators (Cicero, Fabius Maximus, the Younger Cato, the Gracchi brothers) the central point is that their expression fitted their life and character. It is hardly necessary to produce the textual evidence once more; suffice it to say that it is the equivalent, at the individual level, of the conception of a language as the mirror of the national character of the people using it. It was a ready-made cliché anyone could resort to, even if he lacked a thorough linguistic competence and only had a second-hand knowledge of the relevant speeches.

I trust that what precedes has made it clear that Plutarch, though undoubtedly capable to read and understand Latin writings, was far from possessing a thorough knowledge of the language, let alone the competence needed to formulate educated judgments on the stylistic merits of literary works in Latin. It was necessary to stress this point before tackling the final part of Stadter's appendix on *Plutarch's Aesthetic Appreciation of Latin,* which treats the biographer's report of Caesar's victory over Pharnaces, with

[21] Cf. Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin,* 161-163.

[22] Cf. e.g. A.V. Zadorojnyi, *King of his Castle: Plutarch, Demosthenes 1-2,* "PCPhS" 52, 2006, 102-121, especially 105.

[23] J. Geiger, *Plutarch on Late Republican Orators and Rhetoric,* in: L. Van der Stockt (ed.), *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch. Acta of the IV^th^ International Congress of the International Plutarch Society, Leuven, July 3-6, 1996,* Louvain-Namur 2000, 211-223.

[24] Geiger, *Plutarch on Late Republican Orators,* 223. Geiger goes too far when he says (*ibid*. 216-217) that Plutarch fashioned his ideal orator on the eloquence of the Younger Cato, whose speeches he only knew at second hand. He more likely applied to the Younger Cato the ideal he formulates at *praec. ger. reip*. 6, 802E-803A.

[25] Sen. *ep*. 114.1. See Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin,* 159-160, on Plut. *comp. Dem. et Cic*. 1.3-4; *Fab. Max*. 1.7-8; *Cato Min*. 5.3; *Gracchi* 2.3. In other cases (Plut. *Crass*. 3.2-3; *Caes*. 3.1-2) the stereotype may be the opposition of *cura* (ἐπιμέλεια, πόνος) and *ingenium* (φύσις).

his translation of the Roman leader's famous words *veni vidi vici,* and takes me to task for my interpretation of the whole passage.

That these famous words were indeed formulated in Latin by Caesar is made sure by two witnesses: the Elder Seneca[26] and Suetonius[27]. It is quite clear, then, that all the rhetorical effects – namely the asyndeton, the climax (*vidi* is more than *veni, vici* is more than *vidi*), the equal number of syllables, and the alliteration) – are intentional.

Plutarch's report, and his appraisal of the rhetorical effect of the three Latin words he gives in Greek translation, are therefore of the utmost interest:

καὶ τῆς μάχης ταύτης τὴν ὀξύτητα καὶ τὸ τάχος ἀναγγέλλων εἰς Ῥώμην πρός τινα τῶν φίλων Μάτιον ἔγραψε τρεῖς λέξεις· ἦλθον, εἶδον, ἐνίκησα. Ῥωμαϊστὶ δ'αἱ λέξεις εἰς ὅμοιον ἀπολήγουσαι σχῆμα, οὐκ ἀπίθανον τὴν βραχυλογίαν ἔχουσιν[28].

"Reporting to Rome, to Matius, one of his friends, the fierceness and swiftness of this battle, he wrote three words: «I came, I saw, I conquered». In Latin these words, all ending the same way produce a conciseness not devoid of effectiveness."

We cannot help noticing that Plutarch mentions none of the four rhetorical devices enumerated above. What he does emphasize is a fifth outcome of the joining together of the three perfects in the first person, namely the homeoteleuton, in that all three end the same way, in *-i*.

This, according to Plutarch, "produces a conciseness not devoid of effectiveness", the βραχυλογία, which we recognize as one of the main features of the Latin language as emphasized by Plutarch. Actually, we have already found two more terms, referred in this passage to the battle described with the three famous words, namely τάχος and ὀξύτης, employed by Plutarch to denote the characteristics of Latin, as exemplified by the Elder Cato's eloquence[29].

Plutarch is not passing a judgment on Caesar's style, but on the general features of the Latin language. If this is so, it might well be that he was not ignorant of the fact that all Latin perfects end in *-i* at the first person: the

[26] Sen. Rhet. *suas*. 2.22 (making fun of Tuscus, who had transposed these words to the time of the battle at Thermopylae) *"ne insolens barbarus dicat «veni vidi vici»", cum hoc post multos annos divus Iulius victo Pharnace dixerit*.

[27] Suet. *Iul*. 37.2 *Pontico triumpho inter pompae fercula trium verborum praetulit titulum veni vidi vici*.

[28] Plut. *Caes*. 50.3-4.

[29] Cf. above, note 20 (Plut. *Cato mai*. 12.7 τάχος… ὀξύτητα… βραχέως). Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace,* 790, mistakenly states that I consider ὀξύτης and τάχος at Plut. *Caes*. 50.3 to reflect Caesar's style. In reality (Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin,* 164) I pair the two passages as expressing Plutarch's opinion on the characteristics of the Latin language, not of any author's individual style.

morphology of the language, he would say, enabled Caesar to obtain an effective homeoteleuton, which the different types of aorists made impossible in Greek. If the reference were to Caesar's individual style[30], instead, Plutarch would emphasize as the latter's own a phenomenon that can hardly be considered as distinctive or peculiar to Caesar's, or any writer's, style[31].

Let's compare a similar tricolon, made up of three perfects in the first person, in Cicero: *vidi cognovi interfui*[32]. Like in Caesar, we have asyndeton and climax (*cognovi* is more than *vidi, interfui* more than *cognovi*). There is no alliteration, but the rhetorical effect is enhanced by another device: Cicero's tricolon is ascending not merely by the way of climax, but also through the increasing number of syllables – two, three, four –, which of course marks another difference from Caesar's *veni vidi vici*. What must perforce remain is the homeoteleuton, which would be found in any similar tricolon, no matter in what author.

Stadter strives to prove that none of Caesar's rhetorical devices escaped Plutarch[33] – though it cannot be denied that he mentions none of them.

It would of course be impossible to miss asyndeton and climax in any translation that aimed to render Caesar's original faithfully. But when Stadter writes that Plutarch was sensitive to the equal syllabic length of the words, this could be proved only if he had given notice to the reader that he was forced to translate the third verb with a longer word – which, of course, he does not.

Stadter also maintains that Plutarch recognized the alliteration and did his best to reproduce it with his ἦλθον, εἶδον, ἐνίκησα. But, if ἦ- and εἶ- sounded more or less the same way because of the advancing iotacism, this is not true for ἐ-. Besides, we should not forget that Plutarch was not the original author of the tricolon, and that, as proved by Appian[34] and Cassius Dio[35], it was hardly possible to translate Caesar's *veni vidi vici* any other way, so that the alliteration and the equal length of the words would inevitably be destroyed.

[30] As Stadter seems to understand: see previous note.

[31] In that case it would hardly be inadmissible to believe that Plutarch was not aware of the fact that all Latin perfects end in *-i* in the first person. As a matter of fact, in the same passage in which he states that "everybody uses the language of Rome" (Plut. *Plat. quaest.* 10.3, 1010D), he goes on to say that Latin "has dropped almost all prepositions and has no articles". The second statement is true, but the first is certainly not. See however H. Cherniss, *Plutarchi Moralia,* vol. XIII, part 1, with an English Transl., Cambridge Mass.-London 1976, 115-116.

[32] Cic. *fam.* 6.12.1.

[33] Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace,* 790.

[34] Appian. *BC* 2.91 ἦλθον, εἶδον, ἐνίκησα.

[35] Cass. Dio 42.48.1 ἦλθεν … εἶδεν … ἐνίκησε.

The alliteration is of course the most prominent feature in Caesar's tricolon. When I wrote that it totally escaped Plutarch[36], I did not mean that he could not see that the three words all began with the same letter, but that he did not recognize the rhetorical import of this. I then illustrated the little bent of Greek for alliteration, as compared to Latin and several modern languages – which even Stadter is unable to deny[37].

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ABSTRACT:
Contrary to Philip A. Stadter's contention, Plutarch probably possessed no more than a working knowledge of Latin. His judgments on Roman orators and his statements about the character of the Latin language are accordingly based on ready-made clichés. In particular, his evaluation of Caesar's famous motto *veni vidi vici*, which he gives in Greek translation, lays stress on the homeoteleuton, inevitable in any tricolon made up of three Latin perfects in the first person singular, taking no heed of its most prominent feature, namely the alliteration.
KEYWORDS:
Plutarch, Latin language, Caesar's *veni vidi vici,* Philip A. Stadter, homeoteleuton, alliteration.

[36] Setaioli, *Plutarch's Assessment of Latin,* 164.

[37] Stadter, *Plutarch Cites Horace,* 791. The examples of alliteration in Greek that he offers there (791 n. 37) belong in the area of paronomasia and adnomination rather than of alliteration of the type of Caesar's *veni vidi vici*.