

R. G. M. NISBET

I THE ORATOR AND THE READER

Manipulation and response in Cicero's *Fifth Verrine*

The title of this book must not be taken too literally but needs interpretation by the reader. Though much Latin literature suggests the presence of an audience, it was recorded not on tape but papyrus. Speeches have a notably ambiguous status: they reconstruct the style and techniques of living oratory, but once they were issued to the world they were no longer spoken. Not even the content need be the same,¹ for in his published versions Cicero added political manifestos (as in the *Pro Sestio*), omitted procedural technicalities (everywhere), or shifted his stance to suit a developing situation (as in the *Catilinarians*). He expanded some remarks against Piso into a comprehensive invective, he never spoke the famous *Second Philippic*, and the *Pro Milone* that failed is not the one that we have. The present essay deals with the *Fifth Verrine*, which purports to have been delivered in 70 B.C. at the trial of Verres for extortion as governor of Sicily, but as the defendant withdrew into exile after the first preliminaries, not a word was actually uttered. Even if Cicero had a draft of the speech ready for delivery, he would rewrite it in a triumphal spirit when he knew that he had won. He was now not so much persuading a jury as justifying a successful prosecution.²

A problem of presentation arises with any discussion of Cicero's speeches: the text goes on for so long that comment soon becomes diffuse. To meet this difficulty I shall concentrate on a fiftieth part of the *Fifth Verrine*, a page deploring the destruction of a Roman fleet by the pirates near Syracuse (5.92–5). Such a procedure may be acceptable to David West, who in his treatment of Lucretian imagery, Virgilian similes, and Horatian word-play has shown how to select significant examples with a general application.³ What is more, I shall discuss each sentence immediately after it has been quoted, even though this disrupts the continuity of the whole. Talk about literature too often loses sight of the words on the page, and the arrangement here adopted may persuade some readers to respond to the Latin as well as the comment. There will

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0521383072 - Author and Audience in Latin Literature - Edited by Tony Woodman and Jonathan Powell

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be few technical terms and no abstract theory,⁴ only concrete instances of the symbiotic relationship of orator and reader; but some general conclusions will be suggested at the end.

O tempus miserum atque acerbum prouinciae Siciliae! o casum illum multis innocentibus calamitosum atque funestum! o istius nequitiam ac turpitudinem singularem! (5.92)

*What a wretched and bitter moment for the province of Sicily!
What a calamitous and deadly catastrophe it was for many
innocent people! How unprecedented that man's profligacy and
iniquity!*

Cicero's reader would not skip and skim in the modern manner, aiming at no more than the general drift. He would declaim the passage aloud⁵ (or get a trained *anagnostes* to do so), mouthing the repeated *o* (an emotional word in Latin), and emphasising the parallelism of the three resonant clauses. This is the grand style of oratory (*grande genus orationis*), designed to rush an audience into enthusiasm and action: the best reader would have been something of an orator himself, a person with *grauitas* and *auctoritas* as well as an understanding of style, who could at least hint at the orotundity of a great performer. In practice this was beyond most people: a Greek secretary, however literate, could not provide the *timbre* of a Roman senator;⁶ schoolboys might try out their voices, but Cicero's aims were not primarily educational; even a statesman would not imitate the delivery of a real oration⁷ when he was receiving no stimulus from an audience.⁸ Every reading of a speech, as of other works of literature, was to some extent a fresh occasion, like the staging of a play or the performance of a piece of music, and, quite apart from the degree of professionalism, different readers must have produced different effects.

The rhythmical quality of Cicero's speeches must have been particularly difficult to recapture. At the end of most sentences he adopts a favoured metrical pattern, the so-called 'clausula',⁹ whether $- \cup - - \times$ ¹⁰ (*atque funestum*), or $- \cup - \times$ (*singularem*), or $- \cup - - \cup \times$ (*-inciae Siciliae* belongs to this type, with the first two short syllables of *Siciliae* substituted for a long). We cannot suppose that many Romans consciously thought in terms of long and short syllables (crotchets and quavers, as we might describe them), yet we hear of an audience applauding at a *dichoreus* or double-trochee in the clausula ($- \cup - \times$): *hoc dichoreo tantus clamor excitatus est ut admirabile esset* (Cicero, *Orator* 214). Clearly the more receptive listeners found aesthetic pleasure in the rhythm; as Cicero rightly says, 'what music can be found sweeter than

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balanced speech, what poetry more harmonious than an artistically rounded period?' (*De oratore* 2.34 *qui enim cantus moderata oratione dulcior inueniri potest? quod carmen artificiosa uerborum conclusione aptius?*). The movement of formal prose was an integral part of the meaning, the untranslatable quality that gave it its distinction and appeal, but the reader also had a contribution to make. If he proved inadequate, he could destroy a work as surely as a bad actor or musician.

The following sentence also demands a reader with different expectations from our own:

una atque eadem nox erat qua praetor amoris turpissimi flamma,
 classis populi Romani praedonum incendio conflagrabat.

On one and the same night the Governor was on fire with the flame of an iniquitous passion, and the fleet of the Roman people with a conflagration kindled by pirates.

Reactions to literature can change very quickly, and twenty years later Cicero might seem to have crossed the line between the grand and the inflated;¹¹ but some at least of the original readership must have appreciated hyperbole,¹² and far-fetched analogy, and a metaphor that was not yet dead. In a world where houses were more combustible than our own and fire brigades less efficient, they could understand the horror of conflagration; Cicero himself was to play on such fears when he described the incendiarism of Catiline.¹³ The formal phrase *classis populi Romani* is designed to activate patriotic reflexes, as 'Royal Navy' once did. Words for 'pirate' like *praedo* suggested not the picturesque ruffians of our childhood, Long John Silver or Captain Hook, but vicious terrorists who threatened the lives and the livelihood of some of Cicero's own readership. As for Verres' iniquitous passion, we should not forget that many Romans had a strong sense of decorum,¹⁴ which is not the same as puritanism. Young men might be indulged within limits (*Pro Caelio* 39–50), but responsible persons, such as the reader is encouraged to think himself, would deplore anything that impaired the authority and efficiency of a provincial governor.

adfertur nocte intempesta grauis huiusce mali nuntius Syracusas.

At dead of night there is brought to Syracuse the heavy news of this disaster.

After his grandiose exclamations Cicero varies his tone: narratives were written in a simple style¹⁵ to produce credibility, though in the

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Verrines alleged fact and tendentious comment cannot easily be separated. Here the restrained solemnity is designed to affect the reader beyond the literal meaning of the words. The postponement of the subject adds to his suspense. He is encouraged to sense a contrast between the stillness of the night¹⁶ (more noticeable in ancient towns than in our own) and the ensuing hubbub, and to draw on his experience, or perhaps rather his reading, to produce a feeling of sympathetic involvement. Compare Xenophon on the destruction of the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami (*Hellenica* 2.2.3): 'It was night when the ship arrived with news of the disaster. A wailing ran from the Peiraeus to the city... During that night no one slept.' Or Demosthenes in the *De corona* on the fatal loss of Elatea (18.169), a much quoted passage¹⁷ that must have been familiar to educated readers: 'It was evening when a messenger arrived with the news that Elatea had been captured... The generals were summoned, the trumpeter was ordered to attend. The city was full of commotion. The next day at dawn... the citizens went to the ecclesia.' So Macaulay on the relief of Londonderry (*History of England*, ch. 12): 'It was the twenty-eighth of July. The sun had just set: the evening sermon in the cathedral was over; and the heart-broken congregation had separated; when the sentinels on the tower saw the sails of three vessels coming up the Foyle.' A carefully worded narrative may give an impression of objectivity even while it is eliciting a subjective response.

curritur ad praetorium quo istum ex illo praeclaro conuiuio reduxerant paulo ante mulieres cum cantu atque symphonia.

There is a rush to the governor's residence, where Verres had been escorted from his fine dinner-party a short time before – by women, with singing, and a chorus of Greeks.

Any competent reader would see that *praeclaro* was ironic, but his expression might vary from the deadpan to the heavily sarcastic. He could be relied on to remember that Verres had pitched his marquees at the entrance to the Grand Harbour of Syracuse, south of the Arethusa fountain;¹⁸ here in his summer camp, as Cicero calls it (5.96 *aestiuu*), he had entertained married women at lavish picnics. The ordinary Roman might have enjoyed aristocratic magnificence from afar,¹⁹ but Cicero has his eye on the more energetic members of the governing class, who would feel varying degrees of indignation or envy at the luxury of a superior whom in some cases they might hope to supplant. As Antonius is made to say in the *De oratore*, the orator should urge his audience towards love or hate, envy or goodwill, preferably by working on

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existing emotions, but if nothing is obvious, 'by sniffing out their feelings and expectations'.²⁰

In this delightful spot, when his fleet sailed past to do battle with the pirates, Verres had taken the salute²¹ in sandals, wearing a purple cloak and ankle-length tunic, and propped up by one of his girl-friends: 5.86 *stetit soleatus praetor populi Romani cum pallio purpureo tunicaque talari, muliercula nixus in litore*. Quintilian cites this vivid scene as an instance of the realism (ἐνάργεια, *sub oculos subiectio*)²² that encourages the reader to visualise; though such pictures are evidence of literary power rather than actual knowledge, they were regarded as an effective method of persuasion. Quintilian adds that the reader could fill in details that have not been described: 'I for my part seem to see the face and eyes and unseemly blandishments of both of them, and the silent turning away and apprehensive modesty of the bystanders' (8.3.65 *ego certe mihi cernere uideor et uultum et oculos et deformes utriusque blanditias et eorum qui aderant tacitam auersationem ac timidam uerecundiam*).²³ He advises the speaker not to imitate the inclination of Verres' body as he leans against the woman (11.3.90 *non enim ... inclinatio incumbentis in mulierculam Verris imitanda est*); he is discouraging exaggerated gestures, but his warning shows his readiness to think of the episode in visual terms. All this suggests that the writer's imagination was understood more literally than sometimes nowadays, and that readers were expected to picture things that were not explicitly in the text.²⁴ If that is so, every reader could provide a particular colouring of his own.

In fact the details of this scene seem to be instances of the fibs (*mendaciuncula*) that Cicero regards as permissible in invective (*De oratore* 2.241); in the same spirit he will later describe how Verres' eyes were splashed by the victorious pirates' oars (5.100). It is entirely credible that the Governor wore a purple cloak in a Greek city (5.31, 5.137 *tu praetor in prouincia cum tunica pallioque purpureo uisus es*); but it is not likely that Cicero had precise information about the particular occasion in so secluded a place. Informality of dress was a profitable theme in invective²⁵ because it showed a disregard for social position and the dignity of office.²⁶ The ordinary person might wear sandals without criticism, but Cicero's readers would expect better things of a *praetor populi Romani* (again the formal phrase) when they themselves had to endure a Roman summer in a clammy toga and tight boots.²⁷

After his party Verres returned to his *praetorium*; a right-thinking Roman would understand what is not explicitly stated, that Government House required higher standards of behaviour. He would pick up the gibe in the apparently factual *paulo ante*: if it was nearly *intempesta nox*,

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'the unseasonable time of night', then Verres stayed up too late for a man with duties in the morning. *reducerant* at first sight suggests a magistrate's escort of attendants and hangers-on, but by the time we reach the end of the sentence we see that this impression was misleading: the governor's procession has become more like a band of *comissatores*, young men who roamed the streets after a party in search of further pleasure. The postponed subject *mulieres* is meant to shock or amuse: respectable women would not be present on such occasions, so the reader on Cicero's wavelength (a man) could speak the word with scorn and astonishment. Singing was an expected part of the *comissatio*, but it had no place in a governor's escort; so *cantu* as well as *mulieres* might be emphasised with distaste. The Greek word *symphonia* refers to a group of musicians such as Verres had recently appropriated from a captured pirate-ship (5.64); a skilled speaker (perhaps not a Greek *anagnostes*) could pronounce the word in a knowing way to suggest the decadence of foreign culture. Cicero's readers are invited to construct a picture of the Governor rolling home; to share some fun with them about the follies of the great, especially when they were great no more, was an easy way of engaging their sympathy.

Cleomenes, quamquam nox erat, tamen in publico esse non audet; includit se domi.

Although it was night, Cleomenes does not venture to appear in public, but shuts himself indoors.

Cleomenes was the Syracusan commodore who in the flight from the pirates had led his squadron from the front (5.88–9); the point would amuse the more chauvinist Roman reader, just as Gilbert's Duke of Plaza Toro encouraged the least warlike Victorians in their contempt for south European armies. Such a reader might not reflect that because of their inexperience in seamanship, Roman navies had to rely heavily on the despised Greeks. In the ancient world leaders – even emperors – were expected to be visible, and it was easy to stir up comment on their disappearance; yet a dozen years later even Pompey barricaded himself in his house to escape the gangs of Clodius (Asconius 41 Kiessling–Schoell). In fact no sensible person would face a hostile demonstration in the middle of the night, but though Cicero's *quamquam* is misleading, he could rely on most readers not to notice.

neque aderat uxor quae consolari hominem in malis posset.

Nor was the wife at hand who could comfort the fellow in his troubles.

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The implications of this sentence are more damaging than the surface meaning. The wife of Cleomenes was called Nike or 'Victory', an irony that cannot have escaped competent readers, though it is not brought out explicitly. Neither could they be unaware that she was the object of Verres' 'iniquitous passion'; they might not be too shocked by the relationship in itself (any more than Nelson's admirers by Lady Hamilton), but the promotion of Cleomenes to secure his absence could not be condoned.²⁸ Here it is implied that Nike could not comfort her husband because she was comforting Verres instead.²⁹ When Cicero is in a malicious mood, we must look not only at what he says but at what he stops short of saying: innuendo is recognised by the rhetorical theorists (they called it *emphasis* or *significatio*),³⁰ and anybody who had followed the context could easily supply the unspoken thought. For such collaboration with the reader compare Demetrius (probably Cicero's contemporary): 'As Theophrastus says, one should not speak out everything in precise detail, but leave some things for the hearer to work out and understand for himself. When he grasps what you have not expressed, he will be more than your hearer, he will be a witness on your behalf, and more kindly disposed towards you, for you have given him the opportunity to exert his intelligence and he feels he has done so. To express everything as to a fool is to accuse your hearer of being one.'³¹

huius autem praeclari imperatoris ita erat seuera domi disciplina ut in re tanta et tam graui nuntio nemo admitteretur, nemo esset qui auderet aut dormientem excitare aut interpellare uigilantem. (5.93)

But our remarkable commander-in-chief kept such strict control over his household that in so great a crisis, with such heavy tidings to be reported, nobody was admitted, there was nobody who ventured either to rouse him while he slept or to interrupt him when he was awake.

huius imperatoris refers to Verres not Cleomenes, though the latter is described as *imperator* below. Moderns who exaggerate the admitted ambiguity of language might find confusion here, but words must not be taken in isolation: a competent reader would follow the context and see the function of *huius* and *autem*. He would understand the irony of *imperatoris*, a word repeatedly attached to Verres (as well as of *praeclari* and *disciplina*): commanders were only acclaimed by this title when they had won an important victory. He would interpret Verres' somnolence as a lack of *uigilantia* (watchfulness, a prized Roman virtue); yet even in modern times, when communications are far better, persons in authority

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should not be wakened up if nothing can be done till day. When Cicero goes on to say *interpellare uigilantem*, the more alert reader would spot another innuendo: he is being tempted to suspect what is not in fact said, and may be quite untrue (for how could anybody know?), that Verres was up to no good with the commodore's wife.

iam uero re ab omnibus cognita, concursabat urbe tota maxima multitudo.

When in due course the matter was known to everybody, a huge crowd milled about over the whole city.

An ancient reader would understand the urban environment, and sympathise with the concern of the crowd. When public life is conducted in the open air, 'a chill rumour' in Horace's phrase 'seeps from street-corner to street-corner' (*Satires* 2.6.50 *frigidus a rostris manat per compita rumor*). If trouble came in the middle of the night, a public-spirited or curious citizen went outside to see what was happening, as when Propertius had a row with Cynthia (4.8.2). In the alleys of an old city a crowd soon built up, and Cicero needs only a few words to communicate a sense of crisis. It is unlikely that he had precise evidence for the details, but most readers would be content with an account that seemed plausible in the situation. Much ancient oratory, and history, is neither obviously true nor obviously false, but a reasonable guess at the sort of thing that might well have happened.³²

non enim sicut antea erat semper consuetudo, praedonum aduentum significabat ignis e specula sublatus aut tumulo, sed flamma ex ipso incendio nauium et calamitatem acceptam et periculum reliquum nuntiabat.

Contrary to the invariable previous practice the approach of the pirates was signalled not by the raising of fire on a watch-tower or hill, but flame from the actual burning of the ships announced both the disaster that had been suffered and the danger that remained.

Signalling by fire is attested in the historians (even if Aeschylus' beacon-speech was a fantasy), and flames in the night encourage the reader to visualise; compare Macaulay's line on the Armada 'And the red glare on Skiddaw roused the burghers of Carlisle' (just as with our passage, 'burghers' appeals to the solid virtues of the expected readership). Here Cicero presents a more piquant drama: the disaster was signalled by the actual burning of the ships. This had taken place as evening fell (5.91) at Helorus, fifteen miles south of Syracuse: at the

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time the cause of the fire would not be clear (the pirate ships could themselves have been destroyed), and by the middle of the night, when the 'grave news' arrived, the flames might no longer be visible. One suspects a picturesque variation of stereotyped phrases like 'messenger of his own disaster'. But a sympathetic reader would be persuaded by the particularity of the detail, which suggests truthfulness to the uncritical: compare the *Historia Augusta* and *Robinson Crusoe*, to name only secular texts.

cum praetor quaereretur, et constaret neminem ei nuntiasse, fit ad domum eius cum clamore concursus atque impetus.

When the Governor was looked for, and it was established that nobody had informed him, there is a mass rush to his residence accompanied by shouts.

In this whole passage Cicero does not simply narrate alleged facts: by the repetition of key words he encourages the reader to form an impression of turmoil. Thus *conkursus* echoes *curritur* and *conkursabat* above, and *clamore* is echoed by *clamore* below (for shouting was one of the more democratic elements in the Roman political process); note also the recurring references to night and fire. At first sight we might assume that the protesting crowd consisted of Syracusan Greeks: in fact they were Roman citizens, the only people allowed to live on the *Insula* (5.84) where the governor's residence was situated (4.118), merchants at serious risk from the pirates and natural allies of Cicero. This all becomes clear at the end of the paragraph, but the better-informed Roman would understand the situation from the start. The original readership of any ancient work might contribute to its interpretation facts that are less obvious to us.³³

tum iste excitatus, audit rem omnem a Timarchide, sagum sumit – lucebat iam fere... (5.94)

Then wakened at last, he learns the whole business from Timarchides, puts his uniform on (it was now more or less light)...

Timarchides was a freedman of Verres, an agent (we are told) in some of his shadier transactions, who had been privileged to join him and Nike at his parties on the sea-front. Many readers would accept the suggestion (probably not a sincere one) that familiarity with Greeks should be discouraged; they would certainly feel it improper that a Roman governor should be briefed by such a person, though in many provinces this must have been inevitable. The more literate would appreciate the

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irony of the formal *sagum sumit*,³⁴ when it is the unwarlike Verres who is dressing for battle (a significant type of scene since the *Iliad*). The mention of daybreak (like *tum... excitatus* above) is not simply factual but underlines Verres' procrastination (*fere* perhaps betrays exaggeration). A civilian reader would not stop to ask what could be done about the pirates in the middle of the night.

procedit in medium, uini somni stupri plenus.

He steps forth, heavy with drink, sleep, and debauchery.

Cicero's ideal reader could convey by his voice the mock grandiloquence of *procedit in medium*: when a Roman governor appeared, you knew he was there. The ancient world gave only erratic help with punctuation, and modern editions are often misleading; but an experienced reader would see that the clause ended at *medium*, before the deflating climax. A modern scholar will suspect a literary commonplace when a surprised army or general is said to be the worse for drink,³⁵ but a Roman would think that a Roman defeat needed a particular explanation. As for Verres' 'debauchery', the reader is being encouraged to construct a story out of isolated scenes that give the impression of corroborating one another: we are shown in turn the mixed parties on the shore (the only reliable detail), the girl-friend at the review of the fleet, women trooping to the *praetorium* after the symposium, Verres' reluctance to be disturbed at night, his exhaustion the morning after. Cicero was so pleased with his phrase *uini somni stupri plenus* that he applied it later both to Gabinius (*Post reditum in senatu* 13) and Clodius (*De haruspicum responso* 55); though this tells against the truth of the remark, most Romans would see nothing wrong with elaborating the case against a discredited enemy.

excipitur ab omnibus eiusmodi clamore, ut ei Lampsaceni periculi similitudo uersaretur ante oculos; hoc etiam maius hoc uidebatur, quod in odio simili multitudo hominum haec erat maxima.

He is received by everybody with shouting of such a kind that his similar danger at Lampsacus floated before his eyes; the present danger seemed all the greater because amid similar animosity the crowd of people on this occasion was greatest.

Nobody could have known what was floating before Verres' eyes, but most Roman readers would be happy to go along with speculations of this kind; similarly at 5.161, *toto ex ore crudelitas eminebat*,³⁶ they would