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QUIDAM MAGNUS VIDELICET VIR ET SAPIENS
RHETORIC AND PHILOSOPHY IN CICERO'S *DE INVENTIONE*

1. *Introduction*

The first proem of *De inventione* is suggestive both in form and content, but it is also rather atypical. Criticism has long fixated on its peculiarities in relation to the broader context of the treatise. There has even been contention regarding whether this proem, akin to others in Cicero's oeuvre, might have been inserted later in the composition process. In a well-known passage from the *Letters to Atticus*¹, Cicero mentions his "book of preambles" (*volumen prohoemiorum*) and acknowledges the inclusion of an erroneous one in a treatise (*de gloria*), hinting at a multi-stage composition process and the potentially extrinsic nature of such proems. Drawing from significant insights from Giuffrida², further reinforced by a pivotal study by Lévy³, I intend to demonstrate the profound interconnection between the proem's text and the broader thematic context of the work – without overshadowing some objectively anomalous aspects of the introductory "myth". Specifically, I will delve into one of these aspects: the enigmatic figure described as *quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens*.

To begin, let us first quote the complete text (*inv.* 1, 2-3):

Ac si volumus huius rei, quae vocatur eloquentia, sive artis sive studii sive exercitationis cuiusdam sive facultatis ab natura profectae considerare principium, reperiemus id ex honestissimis causis natum atque optimis rationibus profectum. [PHASE 1] Nam fuit quoddam tempus, cum in agris homines passim bestiarum modo vagabantur et sibi victu fero vitam propagabant nec ra-

¹ 16, 6, 4, *nunc neglegentiam meam cognosce. "De gloria" librum ad te misi. At in eo prohoemium idem est quod in Academico tertio. Id evenit ob eam rem quod habeo volumen prohoemiorum. Ex eo eligere soleo cum aliquod σύγγραμμα institui. Itaque iam in Tusculano, qui non meminissem me abusum isto prohoemio, conieci id in eum librum quem tibi misi. Cum autem in navi legerem Academicos, adgnovi erratum meum. Itaque statim novum prohoemium exaravi et tibi misi. Tu illud desecabis, hoc adglutinabis.*

² Giuffrida 1963; see also Alfonsi 1975.

³ Lévy 1995.



tione animi quicquam, sed pleraque viribus corporis administrabant, nondum divinae religionis, non humani ratio colebatur, nemo nuptias viderat legitimas, non certos quisquam aspexerat liberos, non, ius aequabile quid utilitatis haberet, acceperat. Ita propter errorem atque inscientiam caeca ac temeraria dominatrix animi cupiditas ad se explendam viribus corporis abutebatur, perniciosissimis satellitibus. [PHASE 2] Quo tempore quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens cognovit quae materia esset et quanta ad maximas res opportunitas in animis inesset hominum, si quis eam posset elicere et praecipiendo meliorem reddere; qui dispersos homines in agros et in tectis silvestribus abditos ratione quadam compulit unum in locum et congregavit et eos in unam quamque rem inducens utilem atque honestam primo propter insolentiam reclamantes, deinde propter rationem atque orationem studiosius audientes ex feris et inmanibus mites reddidit et mansuetos.

Ac mihi quidem hoc nec tacita videtur nec inops dicendi sapientia perficere potuisse, ut homines a consuetudine subito converteret et ad diversas rationes vitae traduceret. Age vero urbibus constitutis, ut fidem colere et iustitiam retinere discerent et aliis parere sua voluntate consuescerent ac non modo labores excipiendos communis commodi causa, sed etiam vitam amitendam existimarent, qui tandem fieri potuit, nisi homines ea, quae ratione invenissent, eloquentia persuadere potuissent? Profecto nemo nisi gravi ac suavi commotus oratione, cum viribus plurimum posset, ad ius voluisset sine vi descendere, ut inter quos posset excellere, cum iis se pateretur aequari et sua voluntate a iucundissima consuetudine recederet, quae praesertim iam naturae vim optineret propter vetustatem.

Ac primo quidem sic et nata et progressa longius eloquentia videtur et item postea maximis in rebus pacis et belli cum summis hominum utilitatibus esse versata; [PHASE 3] postquam vero commoditas quaedam, prava virtutis imitatrix, sine ratione officii dicendi copiam consecuta est, tum ingenio freta malitia pervertere urbes et vitas hominum labefactare assuevit⁴.

It appears that Cicero does not endorse any specific definition of *eloquentia*: the paired structure *sive* [...] *sive* (*sive artis sive studii sive exercitationis cuiusdam sive facultatis ab natura profectae*) reminds the reader, at least in this regard, of Cicero's appreciation of *epoche*⁵, when necessary. However, he also presents a steadfast conviction: *eloquentia* originates from excellent causes and reasons (*ex honestissimis causis* [...] *atque optimis rationibus*). Cicero does not offer a rigorous demonstration of this assertion, but (with a highly Platonic *nuance*)⁶ he introduces a

⁴ Ed. Achard 1994.

⁵ Lévy 1995, 161.

⁶ On myths in Plato, see Most 2012.

“myth” that, as will be elaborated later, also recurs, albeit with notable differences, in other passages of Cicero’s works.

In its essential lines, the narrative is structured into three phases, distinguished by various temporal determinations (*fuit quoddam tempus cum; quo tempore; postquam vero commoditas quaedam* etc.). The first phase is populated by a humanity in a wild state, devoid of reason, religion, sense of duty, marriage, law, as it is enslaved by the *caeca ac temeraria dominatrix animi cupiditas*. The second phase is characterized by the intervention of a mysterious figure, *quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens*, who, aware of the potential inherent in the human souls, manages to bring together men who were previously scattered, showing them all that is useful and honorable, and thus making them, from wild as they were, *mites [...] et mansuetos*. Finally, the third phase is marked by the insinuation of *malitia*, which corrupts cities and men.

Thus, a pessimistic evolutionary parable is outlined, caught between an origin and an initial stretch of positive development (*ex honestissimis causis natum atque optimis rationibus profectum*) and a subsequent, tragic decline. Nonetheless, upon closer reading the adherence to the widely accepted *topos* of *eloquentia*’s decline turns out to be only partial. The evolutionary trajectory does not actually culminate in decadence⁷. Instead, it transitions into a phase characterized by renewed harmony between *sapientia* and *eloquentia*, a period well-documented in history: Cato, Lelius, Scipio, and the Gracchi serve as tangible examples of this phenomenon⁸. Consequently, it could be argued that in *De inventione* the shift from myth to history also marks a reversal of *eloquentia*’s evolutionary course. While myth ends with decline, history begins with unexpected harmony.

Before delving into the moment and manner in which rhetoric emerges in this narrative, it is pertinent to discuss the position of this myth within the (indeed rather rich) “repertoire” of myths pertaining to the birth of civilization or any of its institutions⁹. They all share, so to

⁷ I owe this point to Ermanno Malaspina.

⁸ 4, *nam quo indignius rem honestissimam et rectissimam violabat stultorum et improborum temeritas et audacia summo cum rei publicae detrimento, eo studiosus et illis resistendum fuit et rei publicae consulendum. Quod nostrum illum non fugit Catonem neque Laelium neque eorum, ut vere dicam, discipulum Africanum neque Gracchos Africani nepotes: quibus in hominibus erat summa virtus et summa virtute amplificata auctoritas et, quae et his rebus ornamento et rei publicae praesidio esset, eloquentia.*

⁹ On the sources of the myth, see already Solmsen 1932.

speak, a “family resemblance”, which inevitably prompts the scholar to place them in dialogue and, above all, to hypothesize genealogical relationships in search of a possible *Urtext*¹⁰. Although I myself will propose some comparisons, I consider it risky and unproductive to speculate on possible sources and models; therefore, I will simply draw attention to those homologies, or dishomologies, that are functional for better understanding the dynamics of the narrative and conceptual development of the Ciceronian text, without any further pretense.

It is hence perhaps worth noting an intriguing homology between the framework of Cicero’s myth and the narrative structure (as well as the evolutionary scheme) underlying the famous fragment 88B25 DK of the Sisyphus (by Euripides, or perhaps by Critias; = fr. T63 ed. Laks-Most 2016)¹¹:

- ἦν χρόνος ὅτ’ ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος
καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ’ ὑπέρτης,
ὅτ’ οὐδὲν ἄθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν
οὔτ’ αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίγνετο.
Κᾶπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους (5)
θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα δίκη τύραννος ἦ
<×-×-×> τήν θ’ ὕβριν δούλην ἔχη·
ἐζημιούτο δ’ εἰ τις ἐξαμαρτάνοι.
Ἔπειτ’ ἐπειδὴ τὰμφανῆ μὲν οἱ νόμοι
ἀπειργον αὐτοὺς ἔργα μὴ πράσσειν βίᾳ, (10)
λάθρα δ’ ἔπρασσον, τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ
<×-> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνὴρ
θεῶν δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
εἶη τι δαίμων τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἂν λάθρα
πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί τι. (15)
Ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ
νόῳ τ’ ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τε καὶ
προσέχων τε ταῦτα καὶ φύσιν θεῖαν φορῶν,
ὃς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται, (20)
τὸ δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται.
Ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῇ τι βουλευῆς κακόν,
τοῦτ’ οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεοὺς· τὸ γὰρ φρονοῦν
<×-> ἔνεστι. τοῦσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων
διδασμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο (25)

¹⁰ See Cole 1967, 60-69 on myths regarding the birth of language.

¹¹ See Sutton 1981, Davies 1989, Santoro 1994, Diggle 1996, Kahn 1997a, Whitmarsh 2014.

ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ.

[...]

τοίους πέριξ ἔστησεν ἀνθρώποις φόβους,

δι' οὓς καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατώκισεν

τὸν δαίμον' οὗτος ἐν πρέποντι χωρίῳ,

τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις κατέσβεσεν.

(40)

**

οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἶμαι πείσαι τινα

θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος.

This is a parallel passage already mentioned by Lévy¹², who rightly emphasized the “creative” nature of πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ, as opposed to the rather “revealing” nature of the *vir* evoked by Cicero. This is undoubtedly true, but perhaps some additional considerations can be added. Firstly, one cannot help but notice the resemblance between the mysterious character mentioned by Sisyphus (and echoed by Cicero’s *magnus vir*) and Aeschylus¹³ (and Plato’s) Prometheus¹⁴, and also with Euripides’ Palamedes¹⁵. In particular, Sisyphus’ lines and Cicero’s myth share a ternary structure, marked by three temporal connections (ἦν χρόνος ὅτε = *fuit quoddam tempus cum; quo tempore* = κάπειτα; *postquam vero* = ἔπειτ’ ἐπειδή). They also share the description of humanity’s origins, dominated by strength and ferocious instincts: ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος / καὶ θηριώδης = *in agris homines passim bestiarum modo vagabantur et sibi victu fero vitam propagabant* [...] *dispersos homines in agros; ισχύος θ’ ὑπέρετης* = *pleraque viribus corporis administrabant* [...] *viribus corporis abutebatur, perniciosissimis satellitibus*. Beyond these not thoroughly conclusive homologies, the two passages exhibit at least two distinctive traits. First, it is significant that, both in Cicero and in the fragment, the turning point is marked by a human individual endowed with wisdom (πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ; *quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens*) and capable of unexpectedly improving the state in which humanity finds itself. Second, it is also signif-

¹² Lévy 1995, 162.

¹³ [Aesch.] *Pr.* 447-468, 476-506.

¹⁴ *Prom.* 322e3 ff.

¹⁵ Fr. 578 K., τὰ τῆς γε λήθης φάρμακ’ ὀρθώσας μόνος, / ἄφωνα φωνήεντα συλλαβὰς τιθεῖς, / ἐξηῦρον ἀνθρώποισι γράμματ’ εἰδέναι, / ὥστ’ οὐ παρόντα ποντίας ὑπὲρ πλακός / τάκει κατ’ οἴκους πάντ’ ἐπίστασθαι καλῶς, / πασιῖν τ’ ἀποθνήσκοντα χρημάτων μέτρον / γράψαντας εἰπεῖν, τὸν λαβόντα δ’ εἰδέναι. / Ἄ δ’ εἰς ἔριν πίπτουσιν ἀνθρώποις κακά, / δέλτος διαιρεῖ, κοῦκ ἔῃ ψευδῆ λέγειν.

icant that these characters are united by wisdom and rhetoric, i.e., psychagogic skills, whereby they introduce, in the case of Sisyphus, the fear of the divine (and therefore of committing any illicit action), and in Cicero, *utile and honestum*. Incidentally, with reference to the last point one must appreciate the Greek fragment's emphasis on the typically rhetorical blending of truth and falsehood in the wise's speeches: τούσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων / διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο / ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ¹⁶. Cicero too emphasizes the necessarily psychagogic role played by *eloquentia*, or *dicendi sapientia*, which is capable of "converting" men to respect for justice and obedience: *ac mihi quidem hoc nec tacita videtur nec inops dicendi sapientia perficere potuisse, ut homines a consuetudine subito converteret et ad diversas rationes vitae traduceret*. Persuasion leads to accepting rules which turn out to be completely different from nature: *qui tandem fieri potuit, nisi homines ea, quae ratione invenissent, eloquentia persuadere potuissent?* An explicit reference to persuasion, with the corresponding Greek πείθω, is also made at the end of the Sisyphus fragment: οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἴομαι πείσαι τινα / θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος. Moreover, in Cicero, the sage's persuasive discourse, which "troubles" primitive men, is described as both *gravis* and *suavis* (*profecto nemo nisi gravi ac suavi commotus oratione*): note that the typically rhetorical association between discourse and sweetness (*suavi [...] oratione*) is already evoked in fragment 25 (λόγους λέγων / διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον). In summary, rhetorical devices become increasingly necessary as the intellectual fragility of the audience grows, for they are both impressive and enlightening (Seneca will say that figures are *inbecillitatis nostrae adminicula*, *epist.* 59, 6). Reason and persuasion are the driving forces of civilization, and they are intrinsically intertwined; as already Isocrates had maintained¹⁷, only *logos*, along with its psychagogic power, is able to turn beasts into men.

As I have already stated above, although the network of similarities outlined so far is suggestive, it does not allow us to determine whether Cicero directly or indirectly knew the verses of the Euripidean/Critian fragment. However, it does reveal a shared underlying narrative structure

¹⁶ See also καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατέκτισεν / τὸν δαίμον' οὗτος ἐν πρέποντι χωρίῳ.

¹⁷ *Nic.* 6, ἐγγενομένου δ' ἡμῖν τοῦ πείθειν ἀλλήλους καὶ δηλοῦν πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς περὶ ὧν ἂν βουλευθῶμεν, οὐ μόνον τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν ἀπηλλάγημεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνελθόντες πόλεις ῥέκισαμεν καὶ νόμους ἐθέμεθα καὶ τέχνας εὖρομεν, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ δι' ἡμῶν μεμηχανημένα λόγος ἡμῖν ἐστὶν ὁ συγκρατασκειάσας. See already Lévy 1995 on this passage.

and some specific narrative patterns. Notably, it highlights the choice to personify the driver of the transition from the state of nature to civilization in the form of an individual who is both wise and rhetorically skilled. This feature is absent from any other surviving literature on the birth of society.

2. Some intertextual reflections

The presence of a man with exceptional qualities, endowed with wisdom and rhetorical ability, warrants the utmost consideration. This feature is particularly notable as it is entirely absent even from a parallel passage in *De oratore* (1, 33), which serves as a sort of “summary” of the passage in *De inventione*:

Ut vero iam ad illa summa veniamus, quae vis alia potuit aut dispersos homines unum in locum congregare aut a fera agrestique vita ad hunc humanum cultum civilemque deducere aut iam constitutis civitatibus leges iudicia iura describere?

The terminological and conceptual references are compelling (*dispersos, unum in locum congregare, a fera agrestique vita ad hunc humanum cultum civilemque deducere*), yet there is no mention of *quidam vir* which holds such importance in the proem; in its place appears the impersonal *vis*. Similarly, this ingredient is also missing from reconstructions of the birth and development of language and rhetoric found in other sources: this is the case, for example, with Seneca¹⁸ and also Quintilian, who criticizes the genetic model formulated in *de inventione* and in the “twin” passage of *de orat.* 1, 33, which are read in a markedly “temporal” and “literal” manner¹⁹.

¹⁸ Sen. *epist.* 59, 6, *invenio tamen translationes verborum ut non temerarias ita quae periculum sui fecerint. Invenio imagines, quibus si quis nos uti vetat et poetis illas solis iudicat esse concessas, neminem mihi videtur ex antiquis legisse, apud quos nondum captabatur plausibilis oratio. Illi, qui simpliciter et demonstrandae rei causa eloquebantur, parabolis referti sunt, quas existimo necessarias, non ex eadem causa qua poetis, sed ut inbecillitatis nostrae adminicula sint, ut et dicentem et audientem in rem praesentem adducant.* See also Quint. 12, 10, 40-42, spec. 42, *denique antiquissimum quemque maxime secundum naturam dixisse contendunt: mox poetis similiores exstitisse, etiamsi parcius, simili tamen ratione, falsa et impropria virtutes ducentes.*

¹⁹ Quint. 3, 2, 1-4, *nec diu nos moretur quaestio, quae rhetorices origo sit. Nam cui dubium est, quin sermonem ab ipsa rerum natura geniti protinus homines acceperint (quod certe principium est eius rei), huic studium et incrementum dederit utilitas, summam ratio et exercitatio? [...] Homines enim, sicuti in medicina, cum viderent alia salubria, alia insalubria, ex observatione eorum effecerunt artem, ita, cum in dicendo alia utilia, alia inutilia*

Another relevant passage comes from *De republica* (3, 3):

et vehiculis tarditati, eademque cum accepisset homines inconditis vocibus inchoatum quiddam et confusum sonantes, incidit has et distinxit in partibus et ut signa quaedam sic verba rebus inpressit hominesque antea dissociatos iucundissimo inter se sermonis vinclo conligavit. A simili etiam mente vocis, qui videbantur infiniti, soni paucis notis inventis sunt omnes signati et expressi, quibus et conloquia cum absentibus et indicia voluntatum et monumenta rerum praeteritarum tenerentur.

Here, a Stoic *mens* is said to be responsible for articulating and distinguishing sounds, as well as imposing names on things, of which the former are “like signs” (*ut signa*). Through the formation of expressive language, such a *mens* has managed to bring together men, who are thus held together by the “bond of speech”, *vinculum sermonis*. Of particular importance, in addition to the language/society connection, is the opposition between finity and infinity that informs the activity conducted by the mind on sounds (which reminds the reader of a well-known passage from Plato’s *Philebus*)²⁰: in themselves infinite (they “seemed infinite”, *videbantur infiniti*), they are “finitized” through *notae*, “symbols”, upon which all linguistic products are then based (Seneca too speaks of *verborum notae* in his Posidonian epistle 90, 25)²¹. In this passage, unlike in *De inventione*, there is no trace of a personalization in the proper sense of the driving force behind civilization; yet, it cannot be denied that it is an intelligence, just as wise as our *quidam vir*.

One last passage by Cicero deserves examination. It comes from the *Pro Sestio* (91)²²:

deprehenderent, notarunt ea ad imitandum vitandumque, et quaedam secundum rationem eorum adiecerunt ipsi quoque; haec confirmata sunt usu, tum quae sciebat quisque docuit. Cicero quidem initium orandi conditoribus urbium ac legum latoribus dedit, in quibus fuisse vim dicendi necesse est; cur tamen hanc primam originem putet, non video, cum sint adhuc quaedam vagae et sine urbibus ac sine legibus gentes, et tamen qui sunt in iis nati et legationibus fungantur et accusent aliqua atque defendant et denique alium alio melius loqui credant.

²⁰ *Phlb.* 17b2-9, φωνὴ μὲν ἡμῖν ἐστὶ πού μίᾳ διὰ τοῦ στόματος ἰούσα, καὶ ἄπειρος αὖ πλῆθει, πάντων τε καὶ ἐκάστου. [...] καὶ οὐδὲν ἑτέρω γε τούτων ἐσμέν πω σοφοί, οὔτε ὅτι τὸ ἄπειρον αὐτῆς ἴσμεν οὔθ' ὅτι τὸ ἔν.

²¹ Incidentally, Philipsson 1886 suggested that Posidonius could be Cicero’s source in *inv.*

²² Actually, there is also another passage from *De officiis* (2, 41) which mentions *unum aliquem* [...] *virtute praestantem*, but the actions he performs are sensibly different from those of the *vir* from *De inventione*: *mihi quidem non apud Medos solum, ut ait Herodotus, sed etiam apud maiores nostros iustitiae fruendae causa videntur olim bene morati reges constituti. Nam cum premeretur in otio multitudo ab iis, qui maiores opes habebant, ad unum aliquem confugiebant virtute praestantem, qui cum prohiberet iniuria tenuiores,*

Quis enim nostrum, iudices, ignorat ita naturam rerum tulisse ut quodam tempore homines nondum neque naturali neque civili iure descripto fusi per agros ac dispersi vagarentur, tantumque haberent quantum manu ac viribus per caedem ac vulnera aut eripere aut retinere potuissent? Qui igitur primi virtute et consilio praestanti exstiterunt, ii perspecto genere humanae docilitatis atque ingeni dissupatos unum in locum congregarunt eosque ex feritate illa ad iustitiam atque ad mansuetudinem transdixerunt. Tum res ad communem utilitatem, quas publicas appellamus, tum conventicula hominum, quae postea civitates nominatae sunt, tum domicilia coniuncta, quas urbis dicimus, invento et divino iure et humano moenibus saepserunt.

The absence of *eloquentia*, which plays an essential role in *De inventione*²³, immediately stands out. But equally striking is the homology of the condition of primitive men: the description of their wandering nature is common (*nam fuit quoddam tempus, cum in agris homines passim bestiarum modo vagabantur, quodam tempore homines [...] fusi per agros ac dispersi vagarentur*), as is the systematic recourse to force and violence (*pleraque viribus corporis administrabant [...] caeca ac temeraria dominatrix animi cupiditas ad se explendam viribus corporis abutebatur, perniciosissimis satellitibus; tantumque haberent quantum manu ac viribus [...] aut eripere aut retinere potuissent*). However, the most remarkable feature is the personification of the driving force of civilization, which, unlike what is read in *De inventione*, here contemplates various subjects²⁴, not just one. Furthermore, both the *vir* of *De inventione* and the characters of the *Pro Sestio* are endowed with exceptional qualities, although there is not perfect congruence regarding their identity: *virtus* and *consilium* in the oration, wisdom and rhetorical skill in *De inventione*. But the element that marks a complete overlap between the two passages is the ability of these civilizing figures to recognize and harness men's *docilitas* and *ingenium*, which represent innate potential²⁵ in need of actualization (*cognovit quae materia esset et quanta ad maximas res opportunitas in animis inesset hominum; perspecto genere humanae docilitatis atque ingeni*). However, as will be seen later, on this point the *De inventione* seems to

aequitate constituenda summos cum infimis pari iure retinebat. Eademque constituendarum legum fuit causa quae regum. On the relationship between this passage and Posidonius' philosophy – especially its reappraisal in Seneca's *epist.* 90, see Zago 2012, 74-78.

²³ According to Lévy 1995, 166 this feature stems from the political nature of the discourse.

²⁴ Lévy 1995, 166 suggests that behind the pluralization lies a fear of articulating praise for personal power capable of unifying people.

²⁵ See already Lévy 1995, 166.

foreshadow operations that are more distinctly philosophical²⁶ than those attributed to the characters described in the *Pro Sestio*.

But this is not the only peculiarity of the myth in *De inventione*. Upon closer examination, the introduction of rhetoric into the narrative does not occur right from the beginning, despite constituting, at least formally, the source and *raison d'être* of the narrative itself. Discourse about rhetoric and its role only begins after the exposition of the essential lines of the plot, in order to account for the transition from the first to the second phase of the history of civilization. This fact cannot be overlooked: initially, the evocation of rhetoric serves to make possible, and thus plausible and credible, the “conversion” to civilization carried out by the mysterious sage, while it is only in the third phase that rhetoric becomes fully the protagonist of the narrative. Therefore, from a narratological point of view, it is an essential ingredient because it makes the development of the first two stages of the history of civilization rationally justifiable. From the point of view of its status, however, *eloquentia* immediately exhibits a duality of use: on one hand, it represents a powerful means of persuasion, capable of driving the development of civilization, if substantiated by wisdom, which is predictably and necessarily possessed by the *quidam vir*; on the other hand, it proves to be a harbinger of moral degeneration and political corruption if it is detached from the guidance of wisdom, as happens in the third phase of the narrative. As a consequence, the peculiar characterization of the *quidam vir*, along with the unexpected introduction of rhetoric in the exposition, reflects a coherent and refined compositional design. In substantial continuity with what he has previously stated²⁷, Cicero vividly illustrates, through the device of the “mythical” narrative, how the union of wisdom and eloquence can be potentially beneficial, while simultaneously highlighting how the self-sufficiency of eloquence has historically been the origin of

²⁶ See the cursory note by Núñez 1997, 88 n. 6: «Este legislador reúne los atributos del orador y del filósofo por lo que, en cierto sentido, no es muy diferente del Político de Platón o del Extranjero que aparece en sus *Leyes*».

²⁷ *Inv.* 1, 1, *ac me quidem diu cogitantem ratio ipsa in hanc potissimum sententiam ducit, ut existimem sapientiam sine eloquentia parum prodesse civitatibus, eloquentiam vero sine sapientia nimium obesse plerumque, prodesse numquam. Quare si quis omissis rectissimis atque honestissimis studiis rationis et officii consumit omnem operam in exercitatione dicendi, is inutilis sibi, perniciosus patriae civis alitur; qui vero ita sese armat eloquentia, ut non oppugnare commoda patriae, sed pro his propugnare possit, is mihi vir et suis et publicis rationibus utilissimus atque amicissimus civis fore videtur.* On these introductory remarks, see Lévy 1995, 158-159.

decline²⁸. In conclusion, compared to other relevant passages, the personification that Cicero employs in *De inventione* to describe the transition from the first to the second phase is not merely an aesthetic variation or an end in itself. Rather, it is essential to demonstrate most effectively how man can be the “engine” of progress if he develops the innate dispositions that most characterize him: reason, which leads to wisdom, and language, which is perfected in eloquence (see *de orat.* 1, 32). In the spirit of Plato, one might say that true rhetoric is always philosophical rhetoric, nourished by wisdom²⁹.

3. *The quidam vir as a philosopher*

If one carefully examines the expressions used to describe the actions carried out by the *magnus vir*, Cicero seems to outline the prototype of the good philosopher:

cognovit, quae materia esset et quanta ad maximas res opportunitas in animis inesset hominum, si quis eam posset elicere et praecipiendo meliorem reddere.

The wisdom attributed to the *quidam vir* has a precise content: the potentialities inherent in the human soul (*inesse*), which only require to be “drawn out” (*elicere*). These verbs seem to be deployed in an almost “technical” sense. In other passages, the verb *insum* designates the presence of innate mental contents, while the verb *elicio* refers to the operation of extracting and articulating such latent contents; two passages can be cited *exempli gratia* in this regard:

fin. 1, 31, itaque aiunt hanc quasi naturalem atque insitam in animis nostris inesse notionem, ut alterum esse appetendum, alterum aspernandum sentiamus.

fin. 2, 2, is enim [scil. Socrates] percontando atque interrogando elicere solebat eorum opiniones, quibuscum disserebat, ut ad ea, quae ii respondissent, si quid videretur, diceret.

Only instruction, *praecipere*, can “actualize” the virtual dispositions in the soul. The combination of these elements suggests that in *De inventione*,

²⁸ See Giuffrida 1963.

²⁹ See already Lévy 1992, 99-100.

Cicero presupposes an innatist model similar to the Middle Platonic concept of ἔννοιαι³⁰, which are innate contents that need to be explicated and articulated through adequate instruction. Cicero himself frequently references this doctrine³¹. In this context, the mythical exemplification of the necessary union between rhetoric and philosophy is further substantiated: the character responsible for the civilization of primitive humanity was a philosopher, who, as mentioned before, could not lack rhetorical skill. Focusing on the philosophical stature of the *quidam vir* thus allows for a deeper understanding of the character. Moreover, this information makes the “Platonic” origin of the myth even more plausible. The proposition of the Ciceronian source being Philo of Larissa, repeatedly suggested by Lévy³², is intriguing, particularly in light of the renowned Ciceronian testimony in *De oratore* 3. However, in the absence of conclusive textual evidence, one can only discern the seamless integration of philosophy and genuine rhetoric with Plato’s teachings.

4. Conclusions

With the structure and peculiarities of the proem clarified, it is now possible to extrapolate from the flow of the narrative some modules and stylistic elements that seem symptomatic of a close, constant and dialectic confrontation with other literary models. In particular, I will try to substantiate the hypothesis (which is meant to remain such) of an Epicurean intertextuality, on the basis of what we read in Lucretius’ poem. As is well known, scholars have been struggling for centuries with the relationship between Cicero and Lucretius; the main problem is to establish whether, in many pages of the Ciceronian *corpus*, there is an allusive intent, if not outright references, to the Lucretian poem, or not³³. In our case, this hypothesis faces an additional chronological difficulty: unless we accept different dates for the drafting of the proemium and the treatise, it seems impossible that Cicero considered *De rerum natura* when composing the proem. Unless, of course, the proem is much later³⁴; in that case, it would be reasonable to hypothesize a Lucre-

³⁰ Bonazzi 2015, 15-68.

³¹ Delle Donne 2022b.

³² Lévy 1992, 99-100 and 1995.

³³ See at least Canfora 2003, Hendrickson 1901, Howe 1951, Merrill 1909, Murley 1928, Pizzani 1984, Préaux 1964, Pucci 1966, Traina 1975, Wheatland Litchfield 1913.

³⁴ This hypothesis was firstly proposed by Marx 1894, 79.

tian, not just Epicurean, intertextuality³⁵. Be that as it may, I will highlight some homologies between the proem and Book V of *De rerum natura*, particularly the famous section dedicated to the history of humanity³⁶. Within the context of this dialogue between the two texts, the philosophical characterization of the *quidam vir* becomes even more significant.

Upon closer examination, almost every element of the Ciceronian narrative finds a parallel in Lucretius: men wandering dispersed like beasts (v. 932, *volgivago vitam tractabant more ferarum = in agris homines passim bestiarum modo vagabantur*: an element also present in Diodorus Siculus³⁷, Vitruvius³⁸, Tzetzes³⁹, and Seneca⁴⁰); the emphasis on physical strength (v. 966, *et manuum mira freti virtute pedumque = sed pleraque viribus corporis administrabant*); the forest dwellings where they are hidden (vv. 955-957, *sed nemora atque cavos montis silvasque colebant / et frutices inter condebant squalida membra / verbera ventorum vitare imbrisque coacti = in tectis silvestribus abditos*)⁴¹; the absence of any sense of duty or positive law (vv. 957-958, 1143-1147 = *non humani officii ratio colebatur, [...] non, ius aequabile quid utilitatis haberet, acceperat*); the absence of marriages and filial bonds (vv. 1011-1014 = *nemo nuptias viderat legitimas, non certos quisquam aspexerat liberos*).

But the most remarkable (apparent) similarity that between the *quidam vir* and the mysterious character, harshly criticized by Lucretius, who allegedly gave origin to language:

Proinde putare aliquem tum nomina distribuisset
 rebus et inde homines didicisset vocabula prima,
 desiperest. Nam cur hic posset cuncta notare
 vocibus et varios sonitus emittere linguae,
 tempore eodem alii facere id non quisse putentur? 1045

³⁵ See Schiesaro 1987 for an interesting account of the rhetorical/declamatory background which was likely shared by both Lucretius and Cicero.

³⁶ On this section, see particularly Grilli 1995; for more bibliography, see Delle Donne 2021.

³⁷ D.S. 1, 8, 1, τοὺς δὲ ἐξ ἀρχῆς γεννηθέντας τῶν ἀνθρώπων φασὶν ἐν ἀτάκτῳ καὶ θηριώδει βίῳ καθεστῶτας σποράδην ἐπὶ τὰς νομάς ἐξιέναι.

³⁸ Vitr. 1, 1, 1, *homines veterē more ut ferae in silvis et speluncis et nemoribus nascebantur ciboque agresti vescendo vitam exigebant*.

³⁹ Tzetzes, *Scholia In Hes. Op.* 42bis, 37 ff. (= II, pp. 137, 36-138, 13 D.-K.), especially ἀγελαῖον διέζων τὸν βίον, δίκην ποιμνίων ἐπὶ νομάς ἐξιόντες.

⁴⁰ See *epist.* 90, where Seneca deals with Posidonius; see 7, “*Illā – inquit – sparsos et aut casis tectos aut aliqua rupe suffossa aut exesae arboris trunco docuit tecta moliri*”. See the commentary by Zago 2012, 65-71.

⁴¹ See already [Aesch.] *Pr.* 452-453, κατώρυχες δ' ἔναιον ὥστ' ἀήσυροι / μύρμηκες ἄντρων ἐν μυχοῖς ἀνηλίους.

Praeterea si non alii quoque vocibus usi
inter se fuerant, unde insita notities est
utilitatis et unde data est huic prima potestas,
quid vellet facere ut sciret animoque videret?
Cogere item pluris unus victosque domare 1050
non poterat, rerum ut perdiscere nomina vellent.
Nec ratione docere ulla suadereque surdis,
quid sit opus facto, facilest; neque enim paterentur
nec ratione ulla sibi ferrent amplius auris
vocis inauditos sonitus obtundere frustra. 1055

As has been argued⁴², the target of this polemic is the legislator hypothesized in Plato's *Cratylus*. Lucretius, perhaps following a literature internal to the school now lost to us, identifies some weaknesses in Plato's character, which undermine his defensibility on a logical level. In essence, the Epicurean does not believe that a man could have introduced language because, first of all, he lacked a *notitia* – that is, a *prolepsis* – of its utility, which could not have preceded the existence and use of language itself, as there is no innate mental content *a priori* to experience. Secondly, how could a single man impose a linguistic system on so many people, constraining their will, especially since they were completely resistant to any attempt at persuasion? As clarified by another Epicurean, Diogenes of Oenoanda⁴³, natural processes cannot be personalized, and this is also the case with language, which is a spontaneous fact, not subject to any “demiurgic” or imposing operation⁴⁴. The same goes for the development of civilization in all its different stages: it is collective utili-

⁴² See Delle Donne 2021 (also for further bibliography).

⁴³ See Delle Donne 2022a. Diod. 1, 8, 3-4 employs “tethical” terminology, but the subject is collective (not a demiurge), and the driving force of the process is the spontaneous, natural reaction to a need: Τῆς φωνῆς δ' ἀσήμου καὶ συγκεχυμένης οὐσης ἐκ τοῦ κατ' ὀλίγον διαρθροῦν τὰς λέξεις, καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τιθέντας σύμβολα περὶ ἐκάστου τῶν ὑποκειμένων γνώριμον σφίσιν αὐτοῖς ποιῆσαι τὴν περὶ πάντων ἐρμηνείαν. Τοιοῦτων δὲ συστημάτων γινομένων καθ' ἅπασαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, οὐχ ὁμόφωνον πάντας ἔχειν τὴν διάλεκτον, ἐκάστων ὡς ἔτυχε συνταξάντων τὰς λέξεις. A similar blend of naturalness and conventionality is also evident in Epicurean doctrine; see Atherton 2009.

⁴⁴ This pattern survives, albeit in a trivialized form, e.g. in Vitruvius, where the development of language is dominated by spontaneity (*profundebantur aliter e spiritu voces; ut optigerant; ex eventu [...] fortuito*) and by custom (*cotidiana consuetudine; in usu*). See Vitruv. 2, 1, 5, *in eo hominum congressu cum profundebantur aliter e spiritu voces, cotidiana consuetudine vocabula, ut optigerant, constituerunt, deinde significando res saepius in usu eventu fari fortuito coeperunt et ita sermones inter se procreaverunt*.

ty⁴⁵, and not an individual, that marks the milestones of this journey. Even Horace⁴⁶, for example, adopts this conception of the birth of language, of names and verbs (*verba [...] nomina*), as a product of natural utility⁴⁷, which then allowed the development of civilization (cities, laws)⁴⁸:

Cum prorepserunt primis animalia terris,
 mutum et turpe pecus, glandem atque cubilia propter 100
 unguibus et pugnis, dein fustibus atque ita porro
 pugnabant armis quae post fabricaverat usus,
 donec verba, quibus voces sensusque notarent,
 nominaque invenere; dehinc absistere bello,
 oppida coeperunt munire et ponere leges, 105
 ne quis fur esset neu latro neu quis adulter.
 (*sat.* 1, 3, vv. 99-106)

In fact, Cicero's reconstruction in *De inventione* is clearly alternative and competing with the Epicurean one in general, and the Lucretian one specifically⁴⁹. With the introduction of the *quidam vir*, it precisely contemplates the error of personalization, the "subjectivization" of spontaneous natural processes against which Lucretius and Diogenes rail. In some way, Cicero evidently deems the use of such a character legitimate, perhaps because he believes he can neutralize Epicurean objections to Plato's demiurgy, which are well-known to him elsewhere⁵⁰. Indeed, with a specular reversal of what is read in Lucretius, the *quidam vir* of *De inventione* manages to perform exactly those actions deemed "foolish" by Lucretius: 1) *ratione quadam compulit unum in locum et congregavit et*; 2) *eos in unam quamque rem inducens utilem atque honestam*; 3) *primo propter insolentiam reclamantes, deinde propter rationem atque orationem studiosius audientes ex feris et inmanibus mites reddidit et mansuetos*. If,

⁴⁵ See Diod. 1, 8, 2 (Καὶ πολεμουμένους μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων ἀλλήλοις βοηθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ συμφέροντος διδασκομένους), 7 (Ἐκ δὲ τοῦ κατ' ὀλίγον ὑπὸ τῆς πείρας διδασκομένους εἰς τε τὰ σπήλαια καταφεύγειν) and 9 (Καθόλου γὰρ πάντων τὴν χρείαν αὐτὴν διδάσκαλον γενέσθαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ὑφηγουμένην οἰκείως τὴν ἐκάστου μάθησιν εὐφυεῖ ζῳῶ καὶ συνεργοῦς ἔχοντι πρὸς ἅπαντα χείρας καὶ λόγον καὶ ψυχῆς ἀγχινοῖαν).

⁴⁶ On Horace's epicureanism, see Grilli 1983.

⁴⁷ See also v. 98, *atque ipsa utilitas, iusti prope mater et aequi*.

⁴⁸ Gowers 2012, 140.

⁴⁹ On Cicero's anti-epicureanism, see Maso 2008.

⁵⁰ I am alluding to the first book of *De natura deorum*: see the papers by Delle Donne 2020, 2024 and 2025.

according to Lucretius, the legislator could not compel and subdue “more” conquered ones (*plures*), the Ciceronian *quidam vir* succeeds precisely in *compellere* and *congregare*, demonstrating his superiority despite the numerical imbalance of forces; moreover, he manages to educate men acting like a skillful teacher (and the semantic field of teaching is already Platonic)⁵¹: just as the supposed legislator should *cuncta notare*, the *vir* reviews everything, *in unam quamque rem [...] utilem atque honestam*⁵²; furthermore, in Cicero there remains a trace of the initial resistance of the primitives to the teachings of the *quidam vir* (*propter insolentiam recalamantes*), but this is a transitional moment, which is then overcome and reconciled thanks to reason (*propter rationem*) and exposure of the same men to the rhetorically effective speeches (*propter [...] orationem*) of the *magnus vir*.

Indeed, in the Ciceronian character, there also persist traits of the Platonic legislator who is opposed by Lucretius: authority and coercive force on the one hand, and educational and instructive capacity on the other, which entails an essentially linguistic activity⁵³; and if Cicero glosses over physical superiority (objected by Lucretius) with a generic *quadam ratione*, which does not allow one to imagine how the *quidam vir* could have practically gathered and collected all the men alone (Lucretius has *unus*), the teaching activity exercised by the same character is more sharply focused and justified in the light of the *ratio/oratio* dichotomy: the *vir* could teach because there was common ground with his rebellious disciples, namely the sharing – albeit in a still embryonic form on their side – of reason and expressive ability, which, as is typical of this literary *topos*, characterise human beings (think of Isocrates)⁵⁴. The heart of Cicero’s proposal seems to lie precisely in the adoption of an inatist conception of rational and linguistic faculties; indeed, before undertaking his civilizing mission, the *quidam vir* “knew” (*cognovit*) what material was inherent in the minds of men: it is this cognitive datum – as mentioned earlier, of a markedly philosophical nature – that seems to substantiate the “demiurgic” action, being its logical and chronological

⁵¹ See Delle Donne 2022b.

⁵² On this point, one should also appreciate the concurrence with Seneca’s *Epistle* 90, 5, where *penes sapientes [...] regnum* the latter *suadebant dissuadebantque et utilia atque inutilia monstrabant*. See the commentary by Zago 2012, esp. 60.

⁵³ On this character and its ancient reappraisals, see Delle Donne 2023.

⁵⁴ See e.g. *Ant.* 253-255. On Isocrates’ contribution to the conception of *logos* – language – as a self-sufficient realm, see Nicolai 1992.

precondition. Ultimately, the Lucretian anti-innatistic objection, which underlies the application of the concept of *prolepsis* = *notitia* to his anti-Platonic criticism, seems neutralized in the Cicero's passage through the reversal of the Epicurean sensistic perspective: reason and language are innate dispositions that require development, but they allow a form of "communication" even with primitives, precisely because they too possess them. In sum, recourse to rhetoric, with its psychagogic power, is always available to any audience because it taps into capacities intrinsic to humans. All that's needed is *quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens*.

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