

JOHN VAN SICKLE

CICERO'S FIRST BIOGRAPHER IN AMERICA (1)

Marcus Tullius Cicero might well have appreciated his *Colloquium Americanum*, with its mingled cultural and political strains. He would have felt gratified to learn that the works of Tully played a formative role for a new culture in a new world, both in the schoolrooms as a textbook for the sons and in the councils as a guide for the fathers of a new republic. The sequel, though, might bemuse the ever thin-skinned Marcus: how active influence gave gradual way to something like commemoration increasingly confined to a new socio-cultural institution, the university, which was a distant heir to those academies in which Cicero from time to time immersed himself only to reemerge to act. Yet even this final relegation to the seminar might console after its fashion, since the scholarship rising in America reacted against a hypercritical school in the old world, which had cut Cicero's reputation down, so that he regained at least some theoretical luster in the new world.

Within the American scholarly community, Cicero's first biographer and defender against his critics actually mingled the cultures of the new and the old worlds. Ernest Gottlieb Sihler (1853-1942) was born to German Lutheran immigrants, educated in a stern Germanic tradition in the American Middle-West, but also Berlin and Leipzig, before winning, in 1878, the first Ph.D. granted by the Johns Hopkins University, which had just been founded as the first research institution in America. Sihler, who was Professor of Latin in New York University from 1892 to 1923, published his *Cicero of Arpinum* in 1914 with the Yale University Press (2). His introduction shows acute awareness of change in the cultural role of Cicero, from the Renaissance "smothering obsession" with a "single great model" for writing Latin to more recent generations of "furnishing drill-

(1) I wrote this paper in English, but translated it into Italian for the audience of the *Colloquium* in New York. Making the translation helped to bring a number of issues into clearer focus; but I have decided to publish the whole in English, since readers will want to see for themselves the original language of Sihler and Gildersleeve. I am grateful to Scevola Mariotti for encouraging this undertaking and to Augusto Campana for a generous and helpful response.

(2) Abbreviated as CA with numbers referring to pages in the following discussion.

matter to immature pupils". Disparagingly Sihler characterizes the latter as "the hard and heavy pressure. . . of mere scholastic and didactic tradition" and he rejects it as a reason for studying Cicero. In its place, Sihler urges the value of Cicero's personality, his representative role at a turning point in history, his "varied and many sided culture" and above all his willingness to risk his life for his convictions (CA viii). He further defends Cicero against the historians Drumann and Mommsen by invoking his own philological mentor Friedrich Ritschl, who against Mommsen had emphasized Cicero's "Hellenic humanity" (CA xi), a "humanity and nobler concerns. . . not limited by that narrow and supremely utilitarian thing, the Roman consciousness" (CA viii).

But alongside this appeal to broad humanism over scholastic and hypercritical narrowness, Sihler also enunciates a conception of method both positivistic and moralistic. He promises to "strive most earnestly, not for novelty, nor for fascination. . . but for this, that both the statements of fact as well as the judgments and valuations should be *reliable*" (CA v). He outlines a boldly positivist aim, "to state and delineate what actually happened", which can only be done, he says, by "ascertaining the exact meaning of all the sources" (CA v). With overtones of a Thucydides rejecting the examples of Homer and Herodotus, Sihler fortifies himself against the seductions of popular genres and styles: "I must not desire to ape the novelist, the sociological essayist, nor the dramatist, nor the journalist". He rejects any "itch. . . for epigrammatic or other brilliant forms" or any "artificial modernization" (Ca vii). Having thus exacerbated his ambitions and pinched back his means, he defines his end as usefulness for the "professional student of history and of Latin letters, whether he be a college-professor or a high school teacher, or not yet arrived at that point of professional maturity" (CA vi).

Despite the narrowness of this intended audience, both specialist and general publications reviewed the book. *The New York Times* puffed it in one uncritical paragraph (February 7, 1915, p. 45). Others found a disparity between purpose and performance. *The Educational Review* called it "sincere and scholarly" but written in a style "anything but Ciceronian, for it is jerky and in spots crabbed" (December 1914, p. 533). More trenchant, *The Dial* marveled that a great university press like Yale allowed such a book to pass:

The gifted Tully, so unanimously lauded as an *orator*, so bitterly debated as a statesman, has been the subject of many pens, and a new treatise on a large scale can be justified only by unique historical *acumen* or some singular felicity of presentation. To the latter qualification, our volume can make no claim whatever; in fact, a rigorous effort is necessary to hold oneself to the task of reading it, so dispiriting is the style even to the most loyal student, so

painful to any reader with the least literary feeling. If the editors of a great university press, like that of Yale, cannot ensure a passably good general presentation, they might at least preclude annoying violations of elementary grammar and punctuation. Naturally, however, almost any failure in English would be gladly forgiven if the work were distinguished by an unusually keen sense for human character and motives, by some fine gift of perspective, some compelling profundity of judgment, some comprehensive faculty of grouping the particular and universal together, in short, by some exceptional power of dealing with history in biography. But unfortunately, one misses these high essentials, and finds instead average ability, unsparing toil and meticulous scholarship (January 1, 1915, page 22).

Likewise the specialists registered varying degrees of discomfort, welcoming the wealth of detail and the independence from Cicero's detractors, but unable to avoid the problem of style. Writing in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, "JW" finds Sihler's work disappointing (3), both for "general readers who want to know what is important about Cicero, and scholars who want the views of a great scholar on difficult points", laudable for "daring to question the arbitrary judgments of Mommsen" and yet written in a style "so jerky and broken that it is not pleasant to read". In terms of "content" Sihler's work seemed "of real value" to an American scholar, H. W. Kingery of Wabash College, who devoted more than half his review, however, to usage and style, which he characterized as "uneven, frequently careless, somewhat heavy, and often Germanesque" (4). A similar ambivalence marks the response of a distinguished British Ciceronian, A. C. Clark (5).

In the most searching and general account of the problem (6), Grant Showerman noted Sihler's weaknesses, both linguistic ("sounds like acquired English") and stylistic, but, above all, something that

may be described by saying that the work lacks relief; the more significant and less significant fact are presented with too nearly the same emphasis, the tone is too unvarying, and the attention of the reader is not aided or stimulated. This makes the book unusually hard to read.

For Showerman, Sihler's reputation guarantess that all the facts are there, and are accurate,

but a greater subordination, or even the omission, of many of them would have made his book more valuable as an appreciation of Cicero and his work. As it stands, it is an example of what might be called naturalism in

(3) "JRS" 6, 1916, 213-14 where "JW" may be one of the members of the Council of the Roman Society, Joseph Wells.

(4) "The Classical Journal" 6, 1915, 425-27.

(5) "The Classical Review" 29, 1915, 124-25.

(6) "The Classical Weekly" 8, 1914, 112.

biography. We have tried naturalism in the novel and on the stage, however, and have come to the conclusion that not all things which are equally true are equally necessary to truth.

The ambivalence of Sihler's contemporaries has given way to neglect by subsequent scholarship. Sihler's name does not appear in Ciceronian studies of recent decades (7): even credit for early defense of Cicero against German detractors goes to a slightly later contemporary, not to Sihler, in the review of modern scholarship by Douglas (8).

Virtual consignment to the dustbin of scholarship makes Sihler paradoxically more interesting. Against the evidence for achievement, like the first Hopkins Ph.D. and the first biography of Cicero in America, questions multiply about the causes of criticism and ultimate neglect by fellow scholars. What vitiated the promise? What made for the failure? Fortunately, as a source of evidence, we have not only Sihler's scholarship but his autobiography, to which he gave the emblematic title, *From Maumee to Thames and Tiber. The Life-Story of an American Classical Scholar* (New York University Press 1930). Written in much the same style as *Cicero of Arpinum*, it offers the same opportunities and obstacles to the reader. Roughly annalistic, it contains a welter of anecdotal detail, jumbling great things with small, from the names of long lost varieties of apple in Indiana door-yards to old-rule baseball, to drilling Greek *-mi* verbs in ill-heated schoolrooms, from the political campaigns of Lincoln and Douglas leading to the American Civil War (Lincoln ridden in effigy on a rail), though Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, but also from pioneer German Lutheran teachers and pastors in the Middle West to Dean Mommsen and Professor Ritschl in Berlin to Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve and Josiah Royce in Baltimore and Henry Drisler, Charlton Lewis and Seth Low in New York.

One reader of Sihler's autobiography speaks of the occasional gold in the mass of detail, which brings to mind Virgil searching through Ennius. But beyond the nuggets broad issues emerge that are still discussed and fought over in America, such as the tension between immigrant culture

(7) For example, Bruno Weil, *2000 Jahre Cicero*, — Zürich/Stuttgart 1962 —; *Cicero*, T. A. Dorey ed., New York 1965; D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero*, New York 1971; E. Rawson, *Cicero a Portrait*, London 1975. Yet Weil analyzes in some detail the political significance in Western culture of the rejection and defense of Cicero (see especially 346-362).

(8) A. E. Douglas, *Cicero (Greece & Rome: Oxford 1968)* 7, n. 1, citing examples of a "sympathetic approach", among them Boissier (Paris 1865), Zielinski (Berlin 1897), Strachan-Davidson (London 1894), then "Later but still unusually favorable for its date was T. Petersson, *Cicero A Biography*, Berkeley 1920, a very full account not confined to Cicero as a politician". No mention of Sihler (New Haven 1914).

and American nationalism, with the particular case of trying to create something distinctly American in areas long dominated by Europe, thus the rise of philology within the matrix of the new professional scholarship and graduate school, philology that still today is prone to foreign domination.

Cultural tension can be inferred already in Sihler's title, *From Maumee to Thames and Tiber*. Of his three emblematic rivers, Thames and Tiber are known to every initiate of Western culture, but who outside the Hoosier state has heard of Maumee? Sihler imagines his own life metaphorically as a journey of cultural achievement; but his metaphor jars, opening questions of tact and viewpoint that are too complex to explore here: would someone at ease in America have used such a metaphor? Can an American feel at ease in relation to those older cultures? Sihler's emphasis on his own obscure origin may cast light, too, on his choice of a title for the Cicero biography, *Cicero of Arpinum*, which emphasizes the obscure origin of the subject, who arrived at Rome from a distance, from the margins, as did Sihler in New York. The German Lutheran from Indian territory, steeped in Greek, might well identify with the philhellene from the Volscian hills. Both were imbued with a culture that was felt as alien and yet by its own lights superior to the dominant world in which they sought place.

The strands of German, Lutheran and Classical culture intertwine in Sihler's narrative. He was born into the parsonage of an immigrant German Lutheran church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1853. Sihler's father was a stern figure, who became a missionary in his forties, after a military and scholarly career: the son emphasizes how his father rose from the ranks to gain entry to the Prussian staff college in Berlin, studied with von Clausewitz, resigned to pursue philosophy, took the Ph.D. in Jena (1829), became a Lutheran missionary to the new world, and picked a girl from a farm to marry when he was 44, she was 17, with six children the result. In the pastor's study, engraved images of Luther, Melancthon and other reformation heroes adorned the walls. In the corner stood whips of green and brown cowhide; the Reverend Doctor Sihler "did not spare the rod" (25) (9). The son recalls, too, how his father would swim in the Maumee, as formerly in the Oder, and this swimming becomes emblematic of their relationship: Ernest plunged heedlessly into icy waters, dared to swim the Mississippi, the Rhine, the Tiber, yet has to admit: "I strove to imitate him, but I never attained the forceful speed" (25).

The mother, in turn, "practiced all the domestic economies which

(9) Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in the autobiography.

she had learned on the farm" (18). She made bread, sauerkraut, soap and candles, managed the cow, the pig-sty and the annual slaughter, with "sausage-making in the kitchen. . . Of course father in his study was not disturbed" (19). She also had become "expert in English" (16) by reading German and English Bibles (10). It was she who named this younger son for a German theologian whose hymns she loved and she, not her pastor-husband, who showed herself "bitterly grieved" when the youth rejected the destined pastoral calling (85).

In this almost pioneer setting, Sihler's education began when his father took his five-year old son on his knee and opened the spelling book, then sent him to elementary school, where the boy absorbed the pearls of German culture and Prussian pride from Wackernagel's reader (20). In 1862, judging that the school no longer provided enough "exertion and stimulus" (30), Dr. Sihler sent his son for Latin and Greek to the local Concordia Gymnasium, where in the 1860's the books, apart from English literature, came almost all from famous scholarly German publishers, Weidmann of Berlin and Teubner of Leipzig (32), and the teachers came from famed German universities. Most boys entered at age 14, so Ernest, being only nine, sought to compensate for his inferior physical prowess by superior study (31). He brought his excellent final report to his father only to hear a stern admonition from St. Paul (1 *Cor.* 4, 7): 'What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' His father, the son recalls more than half a century later, "never praised me to my face".

From classics in Fort Wayne young Sihler went to the theological school, Concordia in St. Louis, where he continued to encounter teachers trained in German universities and his interests veered from theology towards philology. Yet after four years, Lutheran friends of his father provided funds for further study in Berlin. His certificate of matriculation was signed by no less than Mommsen as Dean of the Faculty, and Sihler approached the forbidding world of the seminars with the emulative spirit of the youngest boy from Concordia. Mindful of his family's military heritage, he admired the ceremonials of the Prussian troops.

In counterpoint with this powerful Germanic initiation, Sihler also records moments of felt difference from the surrounding culture. As a child sent on errands, he would hear boys hooting after him, "Damned Dutchman, damned Dutchman" (26). English had to be the language when Concordia played baseball with the town teams (32). He and his fellow students sniggered at the inept eagerness and idiosyncratic pronunciation of a new immigrant from Hesse (47). His sense of cultural tension shows especially in what he says about his return from Germany (85), when he opens a chapter by insisting that "I came back a better Ameri-

can, as many do who had idealized what they had not known by their own vision. 'Ignota semper magna sunt', says Tacitus". Later he remarks that the new university being created by Daniel Coit Gilman in Baltimore "was not grafted on any colonial beginnings or traditions, that her roots were not native at all; she was a western offshoot of academic Europe" (97). Perhaps most revealing of his sense of cultural tension is a story he takes pains to relate, how he closed a year of unhappy exile from New York, teaching among Lutherans in Milwaukee, by arranging for the erection of a large pole to fly the American flag and giving a Decoration Day address on preserving the Union, "a discourse", he insists, "published in one of the evening papers" and which he describes as "a welcome opportunity to attest the loyalty of Wisconsin Lutherans to the laws and welfare of our common land" (146). The year was 1892, but he tells it in 1923, amidst the storm of anti-German sentiment provoked by the World War, which goes unrecorded in his story (10). Such a significant omission seems likely to mean that Sihler found it impossible to deal directly with the personal and cultural dilemmas posed for someone like himself by the war, but indeed by the whole decline of German cultural influence in America in those decades (11).

This personal and cultural background lend new point to the vicissitudes of his professional life. Exhausting the funds provided by his father's Lutheran friends, Sihler left Germany without a degree, but convinced that philology rather than theology must be his calling. Thus when the call came to become assistant pastor with the prospect of succeeding his father, he refused, even though it meant going to teach in a provincial public school. He also took pains to repay his father's Lutheran friends the funds advanced for study. Professional hope was rekindled by the call from Johns Hopkins to become one of the first group of 20 fellows. He worked under Gildersleeve, who like him had studied with Ritschl, and who became his *Doktorvater*. Yet neither the Hopkins Ph.D. nor the authority of Gildersleeve assured him access to the desired community of scholarship. Instead he spent years on the margins, teaching school and tutoring privately, comforted somewhat by the society of the Greek Club of New York, exploited as unpaid research assistant by Henry Drisler of Columbia, forced finally to retreat to a Lutheran institution, Concordia in Milwaukee. Only then did an invitation to New York Uni-

(10) For a broader sketch of German-American relations, see C. E. Schieber, *The Transformation of American Sentiment towards Germany*, Boston / New York 1923, cited by E. C. Kopff, *Wilamowitz and the U.S.A.*, in *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, Darmstadt 1985, 561 n. 20.

(11) A decline documented by Scheiber, cited in the previous note.

versity in 1892 seem at last to open the door to his chosen calling. Still, assimilation to the academic community remained problematic. Goliardic tradition even has it that his treatment of students provoked them to call him "Swine Sihler".

The tortuous professional odyssey corroborates the evidence of the books, with their ambitious projects and their ultimate self-defeat. Ironically, something of what Sihler sought to achieve and fell short of can be seen by comparing him with his master Gildersleeve, especially in the essays written while Gildersleeve also was an outsider, teaching at the University of Virginia and full of the Southern loss in the Civil War (12): "Limits of Culture, Classics and Colleges, University Work in America and Classical Philology, Grammar and Aesthetics". Looking back at these essays from the vantage point of his professorship at Hopkins and editorship of the *American Journal*, as a central figure in a new cultural moment, Gildersleeve describes them as "written in the years 1867-1869, by a man of the Old South, and. . . part of his lifelong work for the furtherance of higher education and literary development among the Southern people, with whom he is identified by birth, by feeling and by fortune. Committed to the *Southern Review*. . . , they went into retirement with the withdrawal of that periodical from the brave but hopeless struggle to keep up a distinct literary life in the Southern States. . . To the New South and the Old North alike they will be as if they had never been" (13). On their editing, Gildersleeve speaks of "a few, very few, intolerable vivacities suppressed, but the partial and harsh judgments, literary and other, that belonged to the period quite as much as to the author have been allowed to stand as documents of the time, sometimes with, usually without protest".

Directly and assuredly Gildersleeve raises issues like those that Sihler touches so archly, obliquely and snobbishly, in short, uncertainly, or else evades (14). Gildersleeve, in short, exemplifies some of the best qualities

(12) On Gildersleeve's ideals and experiences during his Virginia years, see W. W. Briggs, Jr., *Basil L. Gildersleeve at the University of Virginia*, in *Basil L. Gildersleeve. An American Classicist*, W. W. Briggs, Jr. and H. W. Benario ed., Baltimore 1986, 9-20.

(13) *Essays and Studies*, Baltimore 1890, "Six hundred copies only of this edition are printed for sale in the United States". [v].

(14) Gildersleeve wrote "a wide assortment of popular essays in one of the most brilliant and yet typically American styles in this nation's literary history" remarks E. C. Kopff, *Wilamowitz and the U.S.A.* (cited above) 564. Comparison suggests that Sihler may have emulated the manner, which proved fatal without the underlying strength. To Kopff's evidence for the attitude of Gildersleeve towards Wilamowitz should be added the testimony of Sihler (131): charged with digesting articles from "the *Hermes* of Berlin" for Gildersleeve's new "American Journal of Philology", Sihler had difficulty with what he calls "the supra-clever and condes-

of the American cultural community to which Sihler only aspired. The *Doktorvater*, like the Reverend Doctor Sihler swimming in the Maumee, moves with a power denied the striving son (15).

The theme of striving brings us back to Cicero, likewise forever aspirant, the "Father of his Country" called "Arpinate Romulus" in a patriotic's sneer. "American Classical Scholar" Sihler styled himself. Others used terms like "jerky, Germanesque, swine", who never perfectly fits in. It is a final irony that, long after scholarship has dropped Sihler, the anecdotes remain, the obsessions and all too vivid foibles. Shades of the Cicero of the letters, these attract new interest from the very viewpoints Sihler scorned; if not quite the novelist at least the sociological essayist may yet find gold where classicists no longer pan.

ending papers by Wilamowitz. . . : I mean the characteristic manner, from a higher level and *ex cathedra*: thus I noted of Aristarchus, "dagegen helfen Aristarchs schale Exegetenkünste nichts" ["American Journal of Philology" 1, 1880, 265]. I recall that Gildersleeve once, in referring to this trait in the noted Hellenist, quoted the familiar Horatian line: *omnes eodem cogimur*".

(15) Where Sihler sounds dogmatic and harsh on Cicero's role in education (CA [vii], quoted above), Gildersleeve is witty and eloquent: "Nay, if we might whisper it, there are not a few pages of that Turveydrop of Latin style, Marcus Tullius Chickpea, which a man might be forgiven for skipping; how much more literature as that we have just mentioned, for which the longest life would be too short"; from "Limits of Culture" in *Essays and Studies*, p. 8; yet later in the same piece Gildersleeve can write, "But considered merely as a disciplinary exercise of the intellect, it is hard to conceive how anyone can underrate the gymnastics of a practice that enables the mind to retain with ease and combine with readiness the far-sundered members of a Platonic or a Ciceronian sentence, and to regard as a mere juggling dexterity the firmness of memory and the precision of judgment which such a practice tends to develop and maintain." (idem, p. 29).