

Eumolpus' Poetics (Petr. *Sat.* 118): Problems of Interpretation and Train of Thought*

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The article aims to restore the train of thought in Petr. *Sat.* 118. 3–5. In 118. 3, the manuscript reading *sanitatem* (instead of the emendation *vanitatem*) is to be retained and taken not as hinting at the lack of poetic ecstasy, but as ‘stylistic simplicity’ after Pavlova 2017. The adversative *ceterum* does not imply that poetry is the polar opposite of rhetoric, but stresses that contrary to the expectations of poeticizing orators, true poetry is hard toil. The first *neque*-clause does not imply contrast with rhetoric, but calls for a copious style (in particular, copious *sententiae*). The second *neque*-clause implies that poetry must absorb an immense literary tradition in order to attain a copious language. Thus, the two coordinate *neque*-clauses in 118. 3 are paired as requiring copiousness (a) in style and (b) in language. In the next two sentences, (a) and (b) are specified in chiasmic order: (b) the borrowed diction must be elevated (118. 4); (a) the *sententiae* (as the primary stylistic ornament) must be integrated into the texture of the poem (118. 5). The idea that absorbing literary tradition must enrich poetic language may be paralleled in Hor. *Epist.* 2. 2. 115–118. *Sententiae* are regarded as an essential constituent of poetic style, despite the ironic remark on *sententiolae vibrantes* in 118. 2.

Keywords: Petronius, *Satyricon*, literary criticism in antiquity, poetry and rhetoric.

In chapter 118 of the “*Satyricon*” Eumolpus, a disturbingly prolific poet sets out his poetic manifesto and then recites his epic poem about the Civil War. The scope of this article is the first half of this manifesto (118. 1–5). I aim to show that the text poses at least one problem that went unnoticed by scholars and that although single sentences seem to make good sense, the train of thought of the whole section still requires elucidation.

* It is a special pleasure to dedicate this work to my doctoral supervisor Alexander Gavrilov. Among his numerous scholarly achievements, Prof. Gavrilov is the author of a skillful and stylistically exuberant Russian translation of the *Satyricon* (1989) that is renowned far beyond the community of Russian classicists — it was praised, for example, by the famous literary critic Pyotr Vail. Incidentally, the reading *sanitatem* that I defend is also retained there. Gavrilov insists that his concern was to render the rich and subtly differentiated diction of the narrator and numerous characters of the *Satyricon* rather than to solve problems of text and interpretation in it; in any case, his masterpiece of translation is also distinguished by a sensitive and careful attitude to the text of Petronius. Gavrilov’s pupils remember him vividly narrating how he once eavesdropped on the vernacular of ill-mannered Russian nouveaux-riche, who happened to be his neighbours on a tourist bus, and wrote down their extravagant locutions to enrich the diction of Trimalchio and his fellow-freedmen (“*Чѣ мы ха-ха?*”, lit. “*Why you ha-ha?*”, etc.).

I print in bold the key sentence for my analysis and space out the text that is particularly relevant to trace the train of thought:¹

- (1) “multos”, inquit Eumolpus “o iuvenes, carmen deceptit. nam ut quisque versum pedibus instruxit sensumque teniore verborum ambitu intexuit, putavit se continuo in Heliconem venisse. (2) sic forensibus ministeriis exercitati frequenter ad carminis tranquillitatem tamquam ad portum feliciorem refugerunt, credentes facilius poema extrui posse quam controversiam sententiolis vibrantibus pictam. (3) **ceterum neque generosior spiritus sanitatem [vanitatem Pithoeus, edd. — DK] amat, neque concipere aut edere partum mens potest nisi ingenti flumine litterarum inundata.** (4) refugiendum* est ab omni verborum, ut ita dicam, vilitate et sumendae voces a plebe semotae**, ut fiat ‘odi profanum vulgus et arceo’. (5) praeterea curandum est ne sententiae emineant extra corpus orationis expressae, sed intexto vestibus colore niteant. Homerus testis et lyrici Romanusque Vergilius et Horatii curiosa felicitas. ceteri enim aut non viderunt viam qua iretur ad carmen, aut visam*** timuerunt calcare...”

*refugiendum Bücheler: effugiendum **semotae Pius: summotae/submotae ***visam Le Fèvre: versum

First of all, I am concerned by the logical coherence of the sentence printed in bold. Its main problem is the choice between *vanitatem* (an emendation by P. Pithou or some earlier scholar) and the manuscript reading *sanitatem*.² Most scholars support *vanitatem*, referring it to *sententiolae vibrantes* in the preceding sentence, a feature allegedly typical of rhetorical speech (one usually cites the critique of rhetorical schools in *Sat.* 1. 2: *sententiarum vanissimo strepitu*). Those who retain *sanitatem*³ understand it as suggesting the opposition between rational sobriety and poetic ecstasy (cf. *praecipitandus est liber spiritus* and *furentis animi vaticinatio* further in 118. 6, as well as Hor. *AP* 295–297 with Democr. 68 B 17 DK, Plat. *Ion* 533e–534a, etc.).⁴

Contrary to these two lines of interpretation, Anastasija Pavlova in a well-argued paper defends *sanitatem* in another vein: she has convincingly shown that the word was used as a literary term that implied simplicity or temperance of style (it was mostly taken *in bonam partem* as ‘sobriety, soundness’, but sometimes exposed as ‘meagreness’).⁵ Since the passage in question concerns nothing else but style, and *vanitas* can hardly be explained other than as pertaining to tone and content, it does not fit into the context. The usual interpretation of *sanitas* as hinting at the lack of poetic ecstasy is met with the same

¹ The text and most important emendations are quoted after Müller 2003.

² See Pavlova 2017.

³ Klein 1965, 176–178, Conte 1996, 68–72 and others enlisted by Habermehl 2020, 778–779.

⁴ Sullivan 1968, 166–167 retains *sanitatem* translating “But a noble genius does not cling to what is merely sane...”; yet, further he oddly paraphrases: “True poetry needs a rich awareness of literary tradition and an avoidance of what is bizarre or unsound”, as if *sanitas* was not rejected but recommended (Mueller’s original edition of 1961 retained *sanitatem*, but accepted the deletion of the first *neque* by Fraenkel). In Sullivan 1970, 19 Bücheler’s *inanitatem* is supported.

⁵ Pavlova 2017, 132–134 cites Cic. *Brut.* 51 (cf. 275); 284–285 (of Atticism), Quint. *Inst.* 12. 10. 15 and Tac. *Or.* 23. 3; 25. 4 (Quintilian and Tacitus dismiss the alleged *sanitas* as, correspondingly, weakness and exaggerated simplicity). Stark 1964, 54–63 also defends *sanitatem*, but he changes the first *neque* to *utique* (in his view, Eumolpus propagates Atticism).

difficulty: it is out of place in a passage that focuses on style.⁶ By contrast, a literary term for stylistic simplicity, attested in Cicero, Quintilian and Tacitus, is much more appropriate for the context.

Siding with Pavlova in her interpretation of *sanitas*, I have to admit that the passage in question still poses problems. The main problem lies in the sentence in bold and its relation to the text preceding and following it. The two parts connected by *neque ... neque* must have some logical connection; that is to say, these clauses must be either opposing (as in *neque ... neque tamen*) or instead similar at some point and having something in common. Hitherto, no satisfactory explanation of the logical connection between the denunciation of *sanitas* or *vanitas*, on the one hand, and the necessity to absorb literary tradition, on the other, has been offered. Grammatically the sentence is correct, but its logic is unclear.

Consider the following sentence, for example: “When submitting a paper for *Philologia classica*, one should neither use foul language, nor show superficial knowledge of scholarly literature.” While technically acceptable, and actionable enough, this would only have a complete clear sense if the two instructions had a further point in common (as hinting at some well-known ignorant ribald, or referring to the two most typical or notorious shortcomings), or else if they were contrasted with one another (say, if erudite scholars were generally prone to ribaldry).

Vanitatem is accepted by Habermehl 2020, 764, who paraphrases the passage in the following manner: “Belanglose Inhalte (*vanitas*) und abgedroschene Phrasen haben in der Dichtung nichts verloren. Gefordert sind eine gehobene Diktion und Sätzen, die sich in Ton und Stil organisch in den Text einfügen (...). Zudem muss ein ambitionierter Autor die Klassiker — Homer, die griechischen Lyriker, Vergil, Horaz — eingehend rezipiert und sich zu eigen gemacht haben.” This attempt to draw a contrast between idle rhetorical phrases and classical poetry seems far-fetched: the second *neque*-clause clearly lays stress on the quantity of literature to be absorbed (*ingenti flumine litterarum*) and not on the depth. Besides, elevated diction is not the proper opposite of the latter: frothy phrases, as well as thoughtful ones, can be grandiloquent or not.⁷

If we accept *sanitas* and take its denunciation as an appraisal of poetic ecstasy, the logical connection between the two *neque*-clauses is even more problematic: it would suggest that for some reason an ecstatic poet must either spurn classical tradition or cherish it, neither of which gives good sense.⁸

⁶ Habermehl 2020, 779 rightly objects that the conception of poetic ecstasy is yet to follow in 118. 6 (“mit diesem ‘coup de foudre’ wartet Eumolp bis zuletzt”). Indeed, the following recommendations on the choice of words and integrating of *sententiae* in 118. 4–5 clearly suggest conscious art rather than ecstatic possession.

⁷ It may be added that mention of Homer, the Greek lyrics, Virgil and Horace at the end of the passage is not intended as an exhaustive list of those in whom one must be steeped (*ingens flumen litterarum* cannot be confined to these four — besides, prosaic authors must be searched for appropriate words as well, cf. n. 20 below); rather, these are authors who managed to perform the back-breaking task of composing true poetry and will confirm that the requirements just provided by Eumolpus are correct.

⁸ This pair of qualities might be explained as contrasting with what is allegedly typical of rhetoric; it would then imply that rhetoric, by contrast with poetry, is in general (a) ‘alien to ecstasy’ and (b) ‘not impregnated with literary tradition’ (Klein 1965, 176–177 sees here the contrasting conceptions of ‘poeta insanus’ and ‘poeta doctus’, while Conte 1996, 68–72 refers to the transmission of divine inspiration from poets to other poets in Plat. *Ion* 533e). The former idea might be defended as a commonplace; a good parallel would be, e. g., Luc. *Hist. conscr.* 45 (quoted after Macleod 1991, 236): ἡ λέξις δὲ ὄμως ἐπὶ γῆς

Sanitas as ‘stylistic simplicity’ has the advantage of referring to style, which is closer to the following; yet, in this case, too, one has to explain the connection between the requirement of stylistic abundance and absorbing immense literature.⁹

Another problem lies in the word *ceterum* and the connection between the sentence printed in bold and its surrounding text. The whole passage falls apart into separate recommendations that have no thematic or logical unity. Why is the reception of a large literary tradition particularly important for poetry but not for rhetoric? Do the elevated diction and integrated *sententiae* follow from literary erudition, or are these requirements additional? If poetry is displayed as the opposite of rhetoric, why are the *sententiae* mocked in 118. 2 mentioned as a constituent of poetic style in 118. 5? Grammatically the text is sound, but its leading thought is missing.

My own interpretation of the text proceeds from Pavlova’s explanation of *sanitas* as ‘stylistic simplicity’. The spaced out passage does have logical unity, and there is a direct link between the *neque ... neque* sentence printed in bold and the ensuing two separate sentences. The main idea that underlies the passage on the style of poetry can be restored in the following way: ‘True poetry must be copious (1) in style (the first *neque*-clause) and (2) in language (the second *neque*-clause).’ This idea is made explicit in the sentence printed in bold. The two sentences that follow (118. 4–5) specify these requirements with regard to style and language in chiasmic order: the first *neque*-clause (denunciation of stylistic meagreness) is linked with the second sentence about *sententiae* (118. 5); the second *neque*-clause is linked with the first sentence that calls for elevated diction (118. 4).

Eumolpus thus means to say that true poetry must have copious style (further he speaks of *sententiae* — perhaps, he considers these as the main stylistic ornament) and copious language. It is expressly understood that the principal way to enrich poetic language is to absorb an immense literary tradition; further he maintains that the diction borrowed must be elevated (and, probably, that vulgar expressions of common speech must be totally superseded by it).

This interpretation of *sanitas* and *flumen litterarum* provides a secure logical link between the sentence typed in bold and that which follows. The whole passage gains thematic unity: it dwells on the requirements for poetic style and diction and stresses the labour entailed in encountering them. As mentioned, the rest of the chapter focuses on the composition and content of a poem about the Civil War.¹⁰

βεβηκέτω <...> <μή> ξενίζουσα δὲ μηδ’ ὑπὲρ τὸν καιρὸν ἐνθουσιῶσα. κίνδυνος γὰρ αὐτῇ τότε * μέγιστον παρακινήσει καὶ κατενεχθῆναι ἐς τὸν τῆς ποιητικῆς κορύβαντα (cf. Plat. *Ion* 533e), ὥστε μάλιστα πειστέον τηρικαῦτα τῷ χαλινῷ καὶ σωφρονητέον...). However, if we assume that the call for poetic ecstasy in 118. 6 is anticipated here, the following two sentences, especially the remark on *sententiae* in 118. 5, will fall out of context as pertaining neither to ecstasy (cf. the objection in n. 6 above), nor to literary erudition (reception of poetry does not guarantee poetic skills; moreover, *flumen litterarum* is likely to include prosaic authors as well, cf. n. 7 above and n. 20 below).

⁹ Pavlova 2017, 134 explains the logical connection as follows: “In this specific context *sanitas* is not so much the atticizing diction as, more broadly, the over-rational element in poetry <...> *Neque ... neque* presupposes a slight contra-position and *ceterum* denotes a shift to a new point: ‘Anyway, a gifted spirit spurns excessive soundness, but on the other hand the mind cannot conceive or give birth if not inundated with a huge surge of erudition.’” Still, this supposed contra-position between (over)rational element in poetry and literary erudition leaves me unconvinced. It would stress that borrowing from literary tradition is something rational. The idea is surprising (is it true of Virgil’s imitations of Homer?); even so, this kind of rationality would be far from the alleged rationality of rhetoric diction.

¹⁰ The metaphor of absorbing literary tradition is repeated (118. 6 *nisi plenus litteris*; likewise *liber spiritus* in 118. 6 parallels *generosior spiritus* in 118. 3), but here it seemingly refers to structure and composition:

The connection between the sentence at issue and the preceding text is universally understood as an opposition between poetry and rhetoric introduced by the adversative *ceterum*. (This is the reason why most scholars prefer the emendation *vanitatem* to the transmitted *sanitatem*: they infer that since rhetoric is mocked for *sententiolae vibrantes*, the first *neque*-clause must imply the denunciation of idle tricks, *vanitas* being an appropriate word for it.) However, this meets with difficulties:

- (1) the logical connection between the two *neque*-clauses in this case is unclear (the problem that went unnoticed);
- (2) the *sententiae* with regard to poetry appear in the second sentence that follows (118. 5): they are not meant to be avoided, but only integrated, so as not to stand out from the texture.¹¹ If the two *neque*-clauses implied a direct contrast between rhetoric and poetry, this would be partially undermined by the point of coincidence between them. One might explain this coincidence as hinting that by contrast with poetry, rhetorical *sententiae* tend to stick out; yet, *sententiae* are mentioned along with the choice of words as a constituent of poetic style: it is not that ‘*sententiae* are allowed, but they must be integrated’, rather ‘*sententiae* must be integrated’ — it is taken for granted that they are present in poetry.

The wide spectrum of meanings of the adversative *ceterum* (typical of Livy and Silver Latin¹²) and its overtones are difficult to define clearly.¹³ In general, and especially at the beginning of a new clause, *ceterum* seems to concede or lay aside the facts just provided and introduce what follows with some adversative force.¹⁴ In these cases it may be rendered as ‘yet, notwithstanding the above-mentioned’¹⁵ rather than ‘on the contrary’ (as *at, vero, contra, tamen, attamen* etc.), while it is the latter that would better suit a proud differentiation from rhetoric suspected here by many scholars. Still, it must be admitted that sometimes, though rather rarely, *ceterum* does imply a direct contrast.¹⁶ One peculiar

instead of emulating historians in making accurate accounts of events, the free spirit must rush headlong *per ambages deorumque ministeria et fabulosum sententiarum tormentum* (?). Unfortunately, these three manifestations of impregnation with literary tradition are difficult to explain. *Deorum ministeria* is usually taken as the ‘Götterapparat’, *ambages* as either ‘digressions’ or ‘enigmatic speech’ and *fabulosum sententiarum tormentum* as unintelligible or corrupt (see Courtney 2001, 182; Habermehl 2020, 794–800). However, Conte 1996, 70–72 may be correct in explaining all the three expressions as hinting at the language of ecstatic prophecies and referring to the following *furentis animi vaticinatio* (he refers to Ps.-Longin. 13. 2 and Sibyl in Verg. *Aen.* 6. 77–80, 98–102); yet, in my opinion, it would mean that poems must be similar to Pythic oracles and not that they must be of the same (exstatic) nature. In any way, the phrase remains problematic.

¹¹ This was noticed by Sullivan 1968, 169 (he retains *sanitatem*), who reasonably remarks: “...surely, he is not against *sententiae*, and presumably he believed that his own were woven into the texture of the poem.”

¹² See Hofmann — Szantyr 1972, 492: (“= *autem, δὲ*”); *ThLL*. III. 971. 9 ff. s.v. and Habermehl 2006, 213 ad *Sat.* 90. 6.

¹³ See Pinkster 2021, 685–686 (19.64 The use of the adversative coordinator *ceterum*), 1181–1184 (24.27 The adversative connector *ceterum*).

¹⁴ Cf. *OLD* s. v. 5c: “(in slightly adversative sense) apart from these exceptions, qualifications, etc., however that may be.”

¹⁵ Cf. Germ. *übrigens* and Russ. *впрочем*.

¹⁶ E. g., Tac. *Germ.* 2. 3 ...*eaque vera et antiqua nomina. ceterum Germaniae vocabulum recens et nuper additum...*; Petr. *Sat.* 105. 5 *et ego quidem tres plagas Spartana nobilitate concoxi. ceterum Giton semel ictus tam valde exclamavit...*

usage of the adversative *ceterum* contrasts the seeming or pretended state of affairs with reality (= ‘*re vera autem*’, ‘but in fact’).¹⁷

It is not likely that *ceterum* here simply marks the transition to a new point, without any correction: the orators, pungently portrayed by Eumolpus, turn to poetry because they wish to escape from lawyerly bustle and ascend Helicon with little effort; these attitudes and expectations are to be objected to. However, in view of the difficulties mentioned above, it is not necessary to assume a full contrast between rhetoric and poetry, as if they were polar opposites. The main idea is that contrary to the expectations of these would-be poets from among the orators, true poetry is formidable labour,¹⁸ and very few are equal to the task that Eumolpus goes on to specify.¹⁹

Thus, the adversative force of *ceterum* does not necessarily imply that the two *neque*-clauses display the opposite of rhetoric. In fact, the first *neque*-clause calls for stylistic abundance, which is not alien to rhetoric. ‘Stylistic meagreness is no good for true poetry’ — that is, poetry requires rich style in general (and *sententiae* in particular — taking up the preceding *sententiolae vibrantes* and anticipating the following *ne sententiae emineant*). *Sententiae* are not at all condemned as a cheap rhetorical trick; quite the opposite, they are an essential constituent of poetic style (along with other figures of speech that may be implied by the denunciation of *sanitas*), and poets must use them. After all, *sententiae* abound in Horace and Virgil, not to mention the *Bellum Civile* itself. In fact, they are so important for Eumolpus that of all other means of stylistic richness he singles them out. Their value for poetry should not be dismissed on the grounds that in rhetoric they often degrade into petty witticisms.

It is the second *neque*-clause that tacitly contrasts poetry with rhetoric: along with copious figures of thought, poetry must absorb the flood of literature, in order to achieve (elevated) richness of language, which is alien to rhetoric.

I can foresee two objections to the interpretation suggested here.

- (1) It may seem speculative to interpret the absorbing of literary tradition in regard to style as confined to borrowing words and expressions to enrich poetic language. — However, this idea is fairly common and may be paralleled: e. g., in Hor. *Epist.* 2. 2. 109–125, an *ars poetica* in a nutshell, much is said about searching for forgotten words and expressions.²⁰ Besides, *concupere* and *inundare* may hint at the idea of lexical borrowing.²¹

¹⁷ Furneaux 1884, 170 and Goodyear 1972, 160 (ad Tac. *Ann.* 1. 10, with reference to *Hist.* 4. 3. 4, *Ann.* 1. 14. 2; 44. 4, 14. 58. 3; 15. 52. 2; 16. 32. 3; Sall. *Iug.* 76. 1; however, in none of these examples does *ceterum* start a new sentence).

¹⁸ Cf., e. g., Liv. 25. 36. 10 (the Carthaginian commanders laughed contemptuously at the improvised barricade of packsaddles and luggage; however, it proved difficult to overcome it): *ceterum neque transilire nec moliri onera obiecta nec caedere stipatas clitellas ipsisque obrutas sarcinis facile erat*.

¹⁹ A similar attitude is expressed (partly in jest, partly in earnest) by Horace in *Epist.* 2. 2. 51–52 *pau-pertas impulit audax, ut versus facerem*; cf. his poetic program *ibid.* 109–125 and n. 20 below.

²⁰ 115–118 *obscurata diu populo bonus eruet atque / proferet in lucem speciosa vocabula rerum, / quae priscis memorata Catonibus atque Cethegis / nunc situs informis premit et deserta vetustas* (see Brink 1982, 336–339 ad loc.). It is noteworthy that the literary tradition here, and probably also in Petr. *Sat.* 118, is not confined to poetry.

²¹ Courtney 2001, 182 rightly compares Petr. *Sat.* 5. 21–22: *sic flumine largo / plenus Pierio defundes pectore verba*. Cf. Hor. *Epist.* 2. 2. 120–121 (only here it is the poet who in turn enriches the national language): *vemens et liquidus puroque simillimus amni / fundet opes Latiumque beabit divite lingua...*

- (2) If the denunciation of *sanitas* is taken as referring to richness of style in general, it may seem strange that Eumolpus further dwells exclusively on *sententiae*. — Indeed, this attention to aphorisms is noteworthy; perhaps it was regarded as one of the main stylistic ornaments both in rhetoric and in poetry. Other famous figures of style (such as metaphors or metonymies) might partly fall into the category of language, the category of style being represented only by *sententiae*.

To conclude, I give the paraphrase of *Sat.* 118. 3–5 in my interpretation:

But [contrary to the expectations of poeticizing orators], true poetry is a great toil: it requires (a) a copious style [and in particular, *sententiae*]; and (b) a copious language that is to be borrowed from the vast literary tradition.

Further, (a) and (b) are specified in chiasmic order:

- (b) in searching for words and expressions one must aim at elevated diction and avoid vulgar expressions;
(a) *sententiae* [as the main stylistic ornament] must be integrated into the texture of the poem.

The greatest poets will confirm that this is how true poetry is created. Very few are equal to this task.

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