

## Urbanitas against Urbanism: a Latin Paradox

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The history of concepts and their migration often helps to endorse the axiom that words invested with primitive sense wind up migrating towards other fields and that, when they return eventually to their source, they are loaded with adjacent meanings that the crossing of these areas has crystallized in them. Such is the semantic fate of the concept of *urbanitas*. The word is one of the spearheads of Roman rhetoric, but, nevertheless, its origins are in *urbs*, in the city. And, by the time *urbanitas* is fully formed, and the word is retrieved by the architects, it is so loaded with semantic layers of the art of rhetoric, of social ethology, and of psychology that one should wonder if, under the pen of licensed urban thinkers, it has not become an empty play on words.

In short, how can architects lay claim to urbanity, when this Ciceronian neologism (we shall come back to this) is never used in Latin as a category of urbanism? Once it leaves the rhetoric sphere, does urbanity not look like those *mana*-words that Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>1</sup> essentially described as trying to fight against their absence of meaning, despite the lack of any intrinsic meaning within themselves? By doing nothing more than to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified, they are like floating signifiers enslaved by a reflection otherwise accomplished, which can be only partially disciplined, and not fully sealed, by the scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

We shall not inquire into the extent to which the modern “urbanistical” thinking has been able to take benefit from the ancient *urbanitas*, despite the lexical resemblances, and turn it into a concept which is innovative as well as productive. We shall contain this essay to studying this notion, from its earliest times of Latinity until Vitruvius.

When the creator of the word *urbanitas* invented a noun form derived from *urbanus*, he did nothing but follow the Greek practice that gave birth to *politeia* from *polis*. However, the Greek *politeia* is rather far from the Roman *urbanitas*.

Far from referring to the manners or refinement of the city, *politeia* designates the concept of citizenship,<sup>3</sup> the urban civic life,<sup>4</sup> the ensemble of the citizens of a city,<sup>5</sup> the participation to public affairs,<sup>6</sup> the building of a state,<sup>7</sup> a certain type of governance,<sup>8</sup> or even the democratic constitution.<sup>9</sup> In reality, the passage from *urbs* to *urbanitas* is a Roman copy mimicking the

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, see Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, preceded by an “Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss” by Claude Lévi-Strauss; first publ. of the “Essai,” *L’année sociologique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 1 (1923-1924); 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 1950 (re-edited Paris: P.U.F. “Quadrige”, 1991).

2 I summarized briefly the reflection of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss,” foreword to the *Sociologie et anthropologie* by Marcel Mauss (Paris: P.U.F., 1950).

3 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, VI, 104; Herodotus, *Histoires*, IX, 34.

4 Demosthenes, *Orations*, 399, 6.

5 Aristotle, *Politics*, IV, 4, 31 ; IV, 13, 7.

6 Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III, 9, 15.

7 Plato, *Republic*, 562a.

8 Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, I, 1.

9 Isocrates, *Orations*, 67a.

etymological relation between the *astu* and *asteios*,<sup>10</sup> the former referring to the Greek city (in the language of Homer and the Tragedians), and the latter to good taste and culture,<sup>11</sup> to elegance,<sup>12</sup> charm,<sup>13</sup> intelligence,<sup>14</sup> grace and beauty.<sup>15</sup> Then, a contemporary of Cicero (or Cicero himself, who can say?) created the term *urbanitas* from *urbanus*.

In the early days of Roman literature, *urbanus* meant “belonging to the city;”<sup>16</sup> it was referring to the urban refinement and pleasures, even debauchery opposed to the rural and virtuous ideal. We find this meaning in the Latin comedies, especially in the work of Plautus and Terentius.<sup>17</sup> Quintilian reminds us that Cicero considered the word to be a neologism (*noua*),<sup>18</sup> and it is difficult to know when the word began to indicate social and moral distinction. “A man of wisdom and bon ton, as we say nowadays” writes Cicero to one of his correspondents.<sup>19</sup> However, Quintilian contradicts himself and makes Cicero lie by citing a definition given by Cato the Elder:<sup>20</sup>

Urbanity is the characteristic of a man who has produced many good sayings and replies, and who, whether in conversation, in social or convivial gatherings, in public speeches, or under any other circumstances, will speak with humor and appropriateness. If any orator do this, he will undoubtedly succeed in making his audience laugh.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, if the Catonian model of urbanity is the Greek *astéion*, it is because the word *urbanus* – which acquired early on the proper sense that we know – finished in Cato’s time by adorning itself with the entire range of meanings inherent to the concept of *astéion*. Paradoxically, the noun derived from it, *astéiotès*, cannot be the origin of *urbanitas*,<sup>22</sup> despite what the Ovidianist Georges Lafaye writes.<sup>23</sup> As the noun is only recorded since the first century BC, and widely employed by the authors of the Second and then of the Third Sophistic,<sup>24</sup> to the extent that we may wonder if it was not the Roman *urbanitas* which influenced the Hellenistic *astéiotès*, instead of the contrary, as we have for a longtime imagined. It would appear that, as Cicero qualified *urbanus* as *nouus*, its use was not very spread at the time; it only became so later. However, even if the word itself is recent, the concept that it contains is well known to the Roman orator. And Cicero believes that the distinguished manners, the spice of conversation, the spirited dashes, and the

10 There is also an *astunomos* that refers to the art of living, to civilization. When Sophocles writes, at the verse 355 of *Antigone*, about *orgai astunomoi*, he explicitly refers to the civilized manners, a notion that a Latin from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC would have expressed by *urbani mores*.

11 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 116.

12 Aristophanes, *The Acharnians*, 811.

13 Plato, *Lysis*, 204c.

14 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 227d.

15 Hippocrates, *Œuvres*, 1276, 36.

16 See the debatable thesis of Henri Bléry, “Rusticité et urbanité romaines” (PhD Diss., University of Paris, 1909), which argues the contrary...

17 See Charles Guérin, *Person: l’élaboration d’une notion rhétorique au premier siècle avant J.-C. : vol. 2. Théorisation cicéronienne de la persona oratoire* (Paris: Vrin, 2011), 249-250.

18 Quintilian, *Orator’s Education*, VIII, 3, 34. He cites a letter of Cicero to Appius Pulcher (*Ad familiares*, III, 8, 3).

19 In the letter cited above.

20 Cato’s *Apophthegmata* is a collection of memorable sayings and *sententiae*, many of which are literal translations from Greek (see Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder*, 2). The word *urbanus*, equivalent of *astéios*, may have required a definition by virtue of its recent creation.

21 Quintilian, *Orator’s Education*, VI, 3, 105: “Urbanus homo [non] erit cuius multa bene dicta responsaque erunt, et qui in sermonibus, circulis, conuiuiis, item in contionibus, omni denique loco ridicule commode dicet. Ritus erit quicumque haec faciet orator.”

22 On this notion, see the enlightening article by Otto Ribbeck, “*Agroikos*: eine Ethologische Studie,” *Abhandl. d. K. S. Gesellsch. d. Wissensch* 10 (1888): 1-68; esp. 48-66.

23 Georges Lafaye, “L’urbanité romaine [Henri Bléry. Rusticité et urbanité romaines]”, *Journal des savants* 9, 12 (1911): 543-550.

24 At least according to the *Thesaurus linguae graecae* and to the *Lexicon* by Liddell and Scott. They cite Victorius Valerius, Andronicus of Rhodes, Libanius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and a scholiast on Aristophanes.

exquisite courtesy are not solely the privilege of Greeks, but eminently Roman qualities. In fact, urbanity was not founded by the emergence of Roman cities, by their economic development, but obviously by the *Urbs*. Urbanity is thus related to the bon ton of the capital city: it is what Quintilian writes later, referring to a certain *De urbanitate* written by a certain Domitius Marsus:

And as a matter of fact his work was not designed to deal with humor, but with urbane wit, a quality which he regards as peculiar to this city, though it was not till a late period that it was understood in this sense, after the word *Urbs* had come to be accepted as indicating Rome without the addition of any proper noun.<sup>25</sup>

Coming back to *urbanitas* as such and its definition: as shown by Charles Guérin,<sup>26</sup> *urbanitas* is a quality that makes the difference between the parvenu and the purebred Roman. It is therefore a social criterion, before being an intellectual touchstone.<sup>27</sup> This seems to be the most important characteristic. Then come the better known specificities: gentleness of manners, civility, politeness, *savoir-vivre*, bon ton, good manners, the sense of protocol, politeness of language, the right choice of words, phraseological purity, fine spiritual jokes, wit, trait of the spirit, proper jest, and good taste. To these are added the distortions of *urbanitas*: the play, the joke, the inconsistent mockery, and the malicious trick.<sup>28</sup> The drawback of this casuistry is the lack of the referent. The *savoir-vivre* is a floating notion that needs to be anchored in a context: and we cannot lay judgment on the spices of Roman conversations in the light of the writings of the Chevalier de Méré. Thus Cicero is undoubtedly the Roman orator who most frequently uses the word *urbanitas*,<sup>29</sup> and an excerpt from *Brutus* easily shows just how elusive the notion is: "What fashionable delicacy do you mean? Said Brutus. I cannot, said I, pretend to define it: I only know that there is such a quality existing."<sup>30</sup> The occurrences of the word in his texts are far from referring to qualities of the "accomplished socialite." In *Pro Roscio Amerino*,<sup>31</sup> *urbanitas* reflects an excess of refinement; in *Pro Caelio*,<sup>32</sup> it appears as a superior spiritual form (*facetious*) of calumny (*maledictio*). As Charles Guérin also shows, it is on the ethical legitimacy that we should place *urbanitas*. As he very well puts it, *urbanitas* is "in the spirit of the time,"<sup>33</sup> and Cicero always takes pleasure in making his readers seize the "harmonics," even if the entire meaning is not completely drained. In *De oratore*,<sup>34</sup> two attributes of *urbanitas* are detailed: spiritual grace (*facetiarum lepos*) and the salt that spices up any speech (*tamquam sale perspegatur omnis oratio*); we should remember that the fragment from *Brutus* cited above discusses the esthetics of foreign orators; when analyzing the spirit of their eloquence, the truth is revealed without appeal: they lack urbanity, they did not understand or capture the "air of Rome," like yore at Versailles, the parvenus were reproached for failing to grasp the air of the Court.

In one of the letters *ad familiars* (III, 7, 5), Cicero was praising his correspondent by adding to his all Stoic *uirtus* and *prudencia*, the quality of *urbanitas*, understood in this case as the "politeness of manners." Besides all these, there are some occurrences where the word refers to the spirit.<sup>35</sup>

25 Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, VI, 3, 102: "Neque enim ei de risu sed de urbanitate est opus institutum, quam propriam esse nostrae ciuitatis et sero sic intellegi coeptam, postquam urbis appellatione, etiam si nomen proprium non adiceretur, Romam tamen accipi sit receptum."

26 Guérin, *Person*, 240.

27 On this discriminatory principle, see E. S. Ramage, "Urbanitas: Cicero and Quintilian, a Contrast in Attitudes," *American Journal of Philology* 84 (1963): 400.

28 This typology, sometimes questioned by Charles Guérin (Guérin, *Person*, 242) comes from the book of E. de Saint-Denis, *Essai sur le rire et le sourire des Latins*, (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1965), 144-165.

29 See E. S. Ramage, *Urbanitas: Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 60 sq.

30 Cicero, *Brutus*, 171: "Et Brutus: qui est, inquit, iste tandem urbanitatis color? Nescio, inquam; tantum esse quendam scio."

31 Cicero, *Pro Roscio Amerino*, 120.

32 Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 6.

33 Guérin, *Person*, 247.

34 Cicero, *De oratore*, I, 159.

35 Cicero, *Brutus*, 143. *De finibus*, II, 103.

However, we must not forget – like Saint-Denis in his essay – that the term refers to the *uita ciuilis* and even to the law.<sup>36</sup>

Otherwise, Cicero's correspondence includes critiques that are referring explicitly to the Roman reality. A letter to Volumnius, dating from his time as proconsul in Cilicia (51-50 BC), reads: "there is so much scum<sup>37</sup> in the city, that nothing can be so graceless<sup>38</sup> as not to seem graceful to someone."<sup>39</sup> Dispirited and discouraged, he urges his friend to unite his efforts with him in order to defend "the possession of the spirit of the city (*urbanitatis possessionem*), I beg of you, at any cost."<sup>40</sup> A few years later, in 46 BC, Cicero addresses Paetus in words with similar tonality:

For that you love me, and have done so for a long while and without interruption, is indeed a great thing, or rather the greatest, but it is shared with you by many: but that you are yourself so lovable, so gracious, and so delightful in every way—that you have all to yourself. Added to that is your wit, not Attic, but more pungent than that of the Attics, good Roman wit of the true old city style. Now I—think what you will of it—am astonishingly attracted by witticisms, above all of the native kind, especially when I see that they were first infected by Latinism, when the foreign element found its way into the city, and now-a-days by the breeched and Transalpine tribes also, so that no trace of the old-fashioned style of wit can be seen.

Accordingly when I see you, I seem—to confess the truth—to see all the Granii, the Lucilii, as well as the Crassi and Laelii. Upon my life, I have no one left but you in whom I can recognize any likeness of the old racy cheerfulness.<sup>41</sup>

36 This did not pass by the humanist Marius Nizolius, professor at the University of Parma, and author of the *Observationes in M. Tullium Ciceronem* published in 1535, reedited and revised by the author in 1570 in Venice, with the title of *Thesaurus ciceronianus*. This text refers to the Genovese edition from 1662, entitled: *Apparatus latinae locutionis in usum studiosae iuuentutis ex M. Tulii Ciceronis libris collectis* f° 3221.

37 As Bruno Rochette writes, "we can estimate at about one million adult population in Rome at the fall of the Republic, of whom 60 to 70,000 *peregrini*." In "La langue comme facteur d'intégration ou d'exclusion L'Athènes de Périclès et la Rome de Cicéron", in *Serta antiqua et mediaevalia VII. Il cittadino, lo staniero, il barbaro, fra integrazione ed emarginazione. Atti del I° Incontro Internazionale di Storia Antica*, ed. Maria Gabriella Angeli Bertinelli - Angela Donati (Genova, 22-24 maggio 2003, Rome, Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 2005): 3-20.

38 Cicero uses a rare word, the Greek hapax *akytheron* (lit. who has very little charm).

39 Cicero, *Ad familiares*, VII 32, 2 : «*tanta faex est in urbe, ut nihil tam sit akkytheron quod non alicui uenustum uideatur*».

40 Ibid.: «*urbanitatis possessionem, amabo, quibusuis interdicis, defendamus*».

41 Cicero, *Ad familiares*, IX 15, 2-3: "Nam quod me amas, quod id et iam pridem et constanter facis, est id quidem magnum atque haud scio an maximum, sed tibi commune cum multis; quod tu ipse tam amandus es tamque dulcis tamque in omni genere iucundus, id est proprie tuum. Accedunt non Attici sed salsiores quam illi Atticorum Romani veteres atque urbani sales. Ego autem (existimes licet quidlibet) mirifice capior facetiis, maxime nostratibus, praesertim cum eas videam primum oblitus, tum cum in urbem nostram est infusa peregrinitas, nunc vero etiam bractis et Transalpinis nationibus\*\*\*ut nullum veteris leporis vestigium appareat. itaque te cum video, omnis mihi Granios, omnis Lucilios, vere ut dicam, Crassos quoque et Laelios videre videor. moriar si praeter te quemquam reliquum habeo in quo possim imaginem antiquae et vernaculae festivitatis agnoscere." See also *ad Att.* IX 10, 7 and 18, 2 and *Philippics*, XI 12. I am changing the French translation of Jean Baujeu (C.U.F.): L'amitié qui te lie à moi, tu y œuvres depuis longtemps et avec constance, ce qui n'est pas peu de chose, ce qui est même immense à mes yeux, mais ce droit sur la mienne t'es commun avec quantité de gens ; et que tu sois si aimable, si doux et si agréable en tout genre n'appartient qu'à toi ! Il faut ajouter à cela ton esprit je ne dirai pas « attique », mais plus épicé que celui qu'on vante chez les Attiques, le vieil esprit romain de la Ville. Pour ma part, libre à toi d'en penser ce que tu veux – j'adore les plaisanteries, mais surtout celles de chez nous, et davantage encore en voyant qu'elles ont été imprégnées d'abord par le Latium à l'époque où le goût provincial s'est répandu dans notre Ville et de nos jours par les peuples transalpins porteurs de braies si bien qu'on n'aperçoit plus trace de l'enjouement d'autrefois. Ainsi quand je te vois, je crois voir tous les Granios, tous les Lucilios, et même, à parler sincèrement, tous les Crassus et les Laelios ! Que je meure si à part toi il me reste encore quelqu'un en qui je puisse reconnaître un reflet de l'antique gaieté du terroir !

Devoted to the Roman antiquity, Cicero opposes the Latin causticity, the *lepos* and the *festiuitas*, which are of national tradition,<sup>42</sup> with the *rusticitas* of the transalpine Gauls, these *semibarbari*,<sup>43</sup> recently naturalized, whom Caesar had given access to the Senate, decimated by the civil wars.<sup>44</sup>

Otherwise, the origins of this contravention to urbanity can be traced back to the gradual urbanization. The civic life was besieged by a massive sub-proletariat that invaded the *Vrbs*,<sup>45</sup> whose dialectal diversity threatened the integrity of the ancestral speech.<sup>46</sup> The linguistic distrust was thus doubled by a political fear, as this “rampant *peregrinitas*”<sup>47</sup> represented a danger to the purebred Roman. Cicero considered all strangers, be they professional orators, as pettifoggers (*rabulae*) “devoid of education, politeness, and taste”<sup>48</sup> (*indocti et inurbani aut rustici*). And even more disturbing, these *barbaries domestica*<sup>49</sup> were corrupting the very roots of Roman culture, by undermining the innocent speech of children, to whom the Grecian<sup>50</sup> or Gallic sitters were giving a very bad example by dropping language and pronunciation mistakes.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, *Urbanitas* is the cement of the national unity and, paradoxically, at the antipode of the Roman urbanization policy. The more they urbanize, the more strangers they accept, and the more they relinquish that worldly and spiritual “within one’s kind,” that mixture of politeness, jest, wit, and refined laughter that only bonds the *happy few* of the *Vrbs*. We agree in this case with the dichotomy between *urbanitas* and *rusticitas* employed by Quintilian when he defines this notion, in the beginning of a chapter of *Institutio oratoria* dedicated to laughter:

First, there is urbanity (*urbanitas*), which I observe denotes language with a smack of the city in its words, accent and idiom, and further suggests a certain tincture of learning derived from associating with well-educated men; in a word, it represents the opposite of rusticity.<sup>52</sup>

42 M.S. Celentano, “Umorismo, *urbanitas* e polemiche retoriche,” in Mousa. *Scritti in onore di Giuseppe Morelli* (Bologna: Patron Editore, 1997), 323-330.

43 Suetonius, *Life of Iulius Caesar*, 76, 3: *ciuitate donatos et quosdam e semibarbaris Gallorum recepit in curiam*.

44 See Dion Cassius, XLII 51, 5; XLIII 20, 2; XLVIII 22, 3. M. Gelzer, *Caesar. Politician and Statesman*. Translation P. Needham (Oxford 1968): 291 and the note of J. Beaujeu, *Cicéron. Correspondance*, éd. CUF, VII, (Paris 1980): 288-289. The foreign accent of a member of the Senate stirs critiques (according to R.J.A. Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton 1984), 37 and note 49). For a more general discussion, see J.N. Adams, *Bilingualism and Latin Language* (Cambridge, 2003), 432-438.

45 On Rome as an attractive pole of prosperity in the eyes of foreigners, see C. Edwards and G. Woolf, “Cosmopolis: Rome as World City,” in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, eds. C. Edwards and G. Woolf (Cambridge 2003), 2-7.

46 Many authors are concerned with the upsurge of thefts and abuses perpetrated by foreigners. See Seneca, *Dialogues*, 12, 6, 2-3; Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 44; Juvenal, *Satires*, III, 60-61. On Rome’s polyglot environment, see G. Lüdi, *Éléments pour une histoire du plurilinguisme: polyglossie et pratiques plurilingues chez les Romains*, in *Estudis de lingüística i filologia oferts a Antoni M. Badia I Margarit*, I (Barcelona 1995), 553-564 (esp. 555-558). On cultural blends, see R. Oniga, “Lingua e identità etnica nel mondo romano,” *Plurilinguismo* IV (1997): 49-64 et M. Moggi, “Lingua e identità culturale nel mondo antico,” in R. Bombi and G. Graffi (a cura di), *Ethnos e comunità linguistica: un confronto metodologico e interdisciplinare. Atti del convegno int. Udine 5-7 dicembre 1996* (Udine 1998), 97-113. On the Oriental immigration, see J. Cels-Saint-Hilare, “Citoyens romains, esclaves et affranchis: problèmes de démographie,” *REA* CIII (2001): 443-479.

47 The expression belongs to Charles Guérin, *Person*, 254.

48 Cicero, *Brutus*, 180. Alas, these adjectives describe the foreign orators and not the simple citizens.

49 *Ibid.*, 258.

50 Tacitus in *Dialogus de oratoribus* (29) uses the pejorative word *graeculae*. See also J. Christes, “Rom und die Fremden. Bildungsgeschichtliche Aspekte der Akkulturation,” *Gymnasium* CIV (1997): 13-35 [Der Umgang mit dem Fremden in der Vormoderne. Studien zur Akkulturation in bildungshistorischer Sicht (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 1997), 99-116] and D. Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: citizens and strangers* (London, 2000).

51 Quintilian, *Orator’s Education*, I, 1, 4.

52 Quintilian, *Orator’s Education*, VI, 3, 17: “Nam et urbanitas dicitur, qua quidem significari uideo sermonem praefertentem in uerbis et sono et usu proprium quendam gustum urbis et sumptam ex conuersatione doctorum tacitam eruditionem, denique cui contraria sit rusticitas.”

Another fragment of the same chapter enriches this presentation, turning *urbanitas* into a resistance against blandness, tunelessness, foreign influences and rustic stench:

For to my thinking urbanity involves the total absence of all that is incongruous, coarse, unpolished and exotic whether in thought, language, voice or gesture, and resides not so much in isolated sayings as in the whole complexion of our language, just as for the Greeks Atticism meant that elegance of taste that was peculiar to Athens.<sup>53</sup>

We reach, thus, the core of the notion: Quintilian substantially argues that, in the name of the good taste of the city, a good taste that flows into the letters and fosters the art of rhetoric, linguistic breaches that sound like cultural gaps should be avoided. The absence of such a gap is warranted by the aesthetics of uniformity inspired by Cicero, who is not against the variety of styles and the disparities of borrowings, but advocates a sort of synthesis between the ornament and the spirit of simplicity, according to the model of Demosthenes. It is possible to nurture the plurality of styles by going from demonstrative clarity to elevation, but the elocution unity must always be brought forward by convenience, by necessity, by harmony among all parts.<sup>54</sup> in a word, one must imagine a balance between Zeuxis and Phidias, between a certain sense of diversity, and the capability to unify all differences. Or the modern *barbaries*, this theatre of the linguistic chaos, undermines any aesthetic that it might foster. The disparity of words and of styles in Rome is such that the unity of language does not exist anymore. As Cicero writes in a letter to Curio<sup>55</sup> that “the urban spirit (*urbanitatem*) of old times has run dry,” he turns this *urbanitas* into a vector of tonal unity that the anarchic and inconsistent *uarietas* of the *Vrbs*, open to strangers, has helped to develop. Thus, he places this sorrow on the same level as the attachment to the past of some rare obsoletely philhellenic contemporaries, still devoted to “maintaining the ancient glory of Athens” (*retine[re] gloriam antiquam Atticam*). Let us not forget that, here, urbanity is a Roman equivalent of Atticism. True, the notion also belongs to the field of laughter, as Charles Guérin has argued thoroughly:<sup>56</sup> in the second book of *De oratore*, it relates to the *dicacitas* (causticity) and the *facetiae* (vigor), and also to the *sales* (bon-mots, witticisms). The *dicacitas* resides “in throwing and smashing a dash of raillery”<sup>57</sup> (*in iaciendo mittendoque ridiculo*), the *facetiae* “in a story told with grace”<sup>58</sup> (*in narrando aliquid uenuste*), and the *sales* in the spiritual points that pass for a paragon of superior Atticism: “this is certainly all that is most Attic” (*id certe sit uel maxime Atticum*), reminds Cicero.<sup>59</sup> A sort of progression towards the sublime takes shape among these three notions. We could imagine that they contribute to certain transference, to a certain reflection of the *breuitas* that would strain the sought union insofar as they show the different facets of the same object. Or the principle of stylistic harmony defined above in relation to *urbanitas* unifies this apparent threefold division. By virtue of a fierce segregation, Cicero subjected the *barbaries domestica* to the public disdain of the pure Latinity; in the same manner, in order to prevent *urbanitas* from getting caught in its own game, from becoming too indulgent towards itself, he stirs it to seek the rarity (*nec nimis requenti*), to escape the buffoonery (*scurrile*) or the obscenity (*subobsceno*) – like the mime –, to avoid becoming insolent (*petulanti*), impudent (*improbum*), inhuman (*inhumanum*), or unbecoming (*indecorum*).<sup>60</sup> We can see clearly, the *decorum* (convenience) assists the *urbanitas* in all its manifestations.

Let us go back to Quintilian and his definition of urbanity. One fragment draws our attention: “*ut non tam sit in singulis dictis quam in toto colore dicendi.*” Quintilian does not forbid the

53 Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, VI, 3, 107: Nam meo quidem iudicio illa est urbanitas, in qua nihil absonum, nihil agreste, nihil inconditum, nihil peregrinum neque sensu neque uerbis neque ore gestuue possit deprendi, ut non tam sit in singulis dictis quam in toto colore dicendi, qualis apud Graecos atticismos ille reddens Athenarum proprium saporem.”

54 This thesis is largely developed in Cicero's *Orator*.

55 Cicero, *Ad familiares*, VII, 31, 2: “*exaruisse iam ueterem urbanitatem*”.

56 Charles Guérin, *Person*, 257 sq.

57 Cicero, *Orator*, 87.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. 89.

60 Ibid. 88.



interspersed construction of small casual, scattered elements, provided that their disparity does not contradict the general spirit of the work. In this case, the style would become abrupt (*oratio concise*),

a discontinuous style, since our language is composed not of a system of limbs, but of a series of fragments: for your nicely rounded and polished phrases are incapable of cohesion. Further, the color, though bright enough, has no unity, but consists of a number of variegated splashes. A purple stripe appropriately applied lends brilliance to a dress, but a dress decorated with a quantity of patches can never be becoming to anybody. Wherefore, although these ornaments may seem to stand out with a certain glitter of their own, they are rather to be compared to sparks flashing through the smoke than to the actual brilliance of flame: they are, in fact, invisible when the language is of uniform splendor, just as the stars are invisible in the light of day. And when eloquence seeks to secure elevation by frequent small efforts, it merely produces an uneven and broken surface which fails to win the admiration due to outstanding objects and lacks the charm that may be found in a smooth surface.<sup>61</sup>

Besides the issue of a prose composed of *membra disiecta*, this text also raises the problem of aesthetic unity founded on a sum of scattered objects, heterogeneous, strangers to each other and devoid of common purpose. In short, everything is a matter of teleology. The *telos* of a text (a speech, an epic, a musical piece or an 'urbanistical' programme) is unity, and Quintilian questions this unity by asking if the identity of a work is constituted by the sum of its parts.

Cicero had explained it clearly: the parts of a work, no matter their place, must accommodate each other's differences. There are qualities to be respected:<sup>62</sup> correctness<sup>63</sup> (*latinitas*), clarity and radiance<sup>64</sup> (*perspicuitas, lux*), convenience<sup>65</sup> (*decorum*), and ornamental propensity<sup>66</sup> (*ornate dicere*). Thus, urbanity remains the guarantor of these principles. If a speech is not to be interspersed with barbarisms, be they colorful and picturesque, it is because only the *ornatus* modulated according to the *decorum* reveals a great orator. Thereafter, certain means and techniques facilitate this convergence towards the unified ideal: the choice of words<sup>67</sup> (*elegantia*), their arrangement<sup>68</sup> (*collocatio verborum*), their rhythm<sup>69</sup> (*modus*), their beauty<sup>70</sup> (*forma*), the harmony of their disposition<sup>71</sup> (*concinntas*), and the manner in which they are associated<sup>72</sup> (*iunctura*).<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the introduction of rhythm into the prose does not make it pretentious, but rather bestows one of the postulations of poetry: the imitation of Nature. Or, utility may be the keyword in Nature, but rhythm is equally important, as everything pulsates by numbers: it is this exact adequacy of form and function that allows the unity of utility and beauty. The celestial vault, the human body, the framework of a ship, the construction of a well done temple like the one of Jupiter Capitolinus are marvelous compromises between beauty and utility, and obey to

61 Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, VIII, 5, 27-30: "[...] soluta fere oratio et e singulis non membris sed frustis conlata structura caret, cum illa rutunda et undique circumcisa insistere inuicem nequeant. Praeter hoc etiam color ipse dicendi quamlibet clarus multis tamen ac uariis uelut maculis conspergitur. Porro, ut adferunt lumen clausus et purpureae loco insertae, ita certe neminem deceat intertexta pluribus notis uestis. Quare licet haec et nitere et aliquatenus extare uideantur, tamen et lumina illa non flammae sed scintillis inter fumum emicantibus similia dixeris (quae ne apparent quidem ubi tota lucet oratio, ut in sole sidera ipsa desinunt cerni) et quae crebris paruisque conatibus se attollunt inaequalia tantum et uelut confragosa nec admirationem consequuntur eminentium et planorum gratiam perdunt."

62 He develops this argument in *De Oratore* (book III) and in *Orator*.

63 Cicero, *De oratore*, III, 29, 37, 38, 39, 40, 49, 52.

64 Ibid., III, 24.

65 Cicero, *Orator*, 70 and 82.

66 Cicero, *De oratore*, III, 50.

67 Cicero, *Orator*, 79.

68 Cicero, *De oratore*, III, 171-172.

69 Ibid., III, 173, 176, 179... See also *numerus* at paragraphs 184, 194 et 196.

70 Ibid., III, 199.

71 Ibid., III, 100, 203, 207 (*concinne*).

72 Ibid., III, 91 (*iunctio*), 172 (*iuncta oratio*).

73 Ibid., III, *passim*.

a rhythmical and musical perfection<sup>74</sup> that provokes pleasure (*voluptas*). Here, Cicero offers a definition of classical art: beauty is not defined as overlaid ornament, but as the perception of an inner and organic rationality, thus vivid, of the work of art, of which the model is the human body. Luxury is not superfluous, but the necessary, the plenitude of the necessary.

Therefore, *urbanitas* adapts to the diversity of parts, provided that they obey an idea. This brings us to the Platonism of Cicero and Quintilian: as shown by Panofsky,<sup>75</sup> the ideal sculptor does not have his heart set out to represent a model, even if perfect; he bears an extrinsic idea of beauty (*species pulchritudinis eximia*), and it is this idea that he seeks constantly by shaping the matter.<sup>76</sup> In fact, he does not copy the parts of the model, but rather engages in a clever and inspired assemblage, carefully selecting and combining accomplished aspects of the human beauty. The realization of the ideal is somewhat dependent of the perfect graft. This demiurgic power finds an equivalent in the art of using the “three styles” described by Cicero in *Orator*: the artist must be a *moderator* who works on a triple stylistic palette, the *tripertita uarietas*. A whole array of possibilities of the language opens for him: first, the low style, close to conversation and mixture of good linguistics<sup>77</sup> (*sanitas*), diligent carelessness<sup>78</sup> (*neglegentia diligens*) and convenience<sup>79</sup> (*decorum*), in short, a Roman version of the isocratic Atticism. Then, the medium style, which celebrates the asianist<sup>80</sup> tendencies, especially the *suavitas*, that rules the entire range of tropes. Proper to the encomiastic (laudatory) genre, this style is founded in imagination and inspires delectation.<sup>81</sup> Finally, the vehement style, the grand style, a sort of focal point of the Ciceronian spectrum, towards which all the colors and all the lights of the oratory prism converge. Ample, deep, rich, rough, burning, it is the strong reinforcement of prolepsis: it converts the most unruly spirits; it does not seek a quick and easy change of opinion (what sophists did), but it pursues interior conversion, lucid adhesion, reconciliation with the self, and civilized redemption. *Urbanitas* is thus a mediating quality; it inaugurates an aesthetic of *concordia discors*, to extend the metaphor, and a sort of rhetorical diplomacy.

The question that emerges at the end of this journey underlines several paradoxes that could be of interest to the urban thought. The growing urbanization disintegrates the city, while urbanity favors the rallying of the best around unifying aesthetic values. No wonder that the minds of intellectuals and upper classes towards the end of the Republic associated savage urbanism to the theme of decadence. The *rusticitas* is without a doubt a vector of coarseness, but the countryside remains the place of morality. Let us remember Propertius: “it is with sorrow that I am watching

74 The third book of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, dedicated to *lexis* (figures of speech) and to *taxis* (parts of speech) clearly states the need for rhythm within a period or in the arrangement of parts: this is what ensures the coherence of the global structure of a work. If we look closely at the crown moldings of a temple's podium, which is a reversed echo of the base moldings, we can find, in a different order, an illustration of the Aristotelian rule that a sentence begins with a primary peon and finishes with a secondary peon, in virtue of a reverse reflection. This analogy ensures the unity of parts and their integration in serial and articulated series. The sense of symmetry and of proportion is, in fact, equally familiar to orators and architects. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 8 and 9. Cicero, *De oratore*, III, 45, 178 sq.

75 Erwin Panofsky, *Idea. Contribution à l'histoire d'une ancienne théorie de l'art*, translated from German by H. Joly (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) [1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1924].

76 I refer to the admirable text from *Orator*, II, 8: “For it must not be thought that the ingenious artist, when he was sketching out the form of a Jupiter, or a Minerva, borrowed the likeness from any particular object;—but a certain admirable semblance of beauty was present to his mind, which he viewed and dwelt upon, and by which his skill and his hand were guided.” (nec vero ille artifex cum faceret Iovis formam aut Minervae, contemplabatur aliquem e quo similitudinem duceret, sed ipsius in mente insidebat species pulchritudinis eximia quaedam, quam intuens in eaque defixus ad illius similitudinem artem et manum dirigebat.)

77 Cicero, *Orator*, 99.

78 Ibid., 77-78.

79 Ibid., 70, 82. The Ciceronian notion of *decorum*, inherited from *prêpon* in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Panetius, finds an equivalent in the Vitruvian *décor*: thus emerges an analogy between the definitions of *De officiis*, I, 96, and *De architectura*, I, 2, 5.

80 They are foreign tendencies, but well managed and by no means “barbarian”.

81 This Ciceronian version of Asianism eliminates all excess, and finds legitimacy in the “attic” authority of Demetrius and Phalereus.



you leave Rome; but I am pleased, Cynthia, since you're without me, you're in the quiet country. The fields are chaste..."<sup>82</sup> And this decadence is equally related to the spirit of the places as it is to their infrastructure. The ancient Romans were attached to horizontal landscapes; but the contemporaries of Cicero are confronted to the vertical landscape of the *insulae*, these disparate neighborhoods that border gigantism. Moralists regard them with dismay: nothing but large windows, flowered pergolas, added balconies, floors laid on top of each other as suspended, all surrounded by porticoes that prevent a panoptic vision. Supported by flimsy foundations, these uncomfortable constructions, with no running water, no windows, steep stairs, heated by improvised fire baskets, were constantly threatened by ruin or fire.<sup>83</sup> Cicero's heart is broken because these *insulae* have replaced the Pompeian buildings that ensured a certain unity of the family life. In his eyes, the transformations of the habitat reflected the massive immigration witnessed by Rome. In the Roman *domus*, everything was hierarchically structured, and urbanism had the color of urbanity: the *compluvium* that was giving birth to water rooms and basins in the middle of the *triclinium* was domesticating and humanizing nature, summoned in the heart of the city, in the closed space of the *domus*, as an affront to promiscuity. On the contrary, the *insula* instituted this promiscuity as *modus uiuendi*. This urban massif contributed to the decline of the distinction and values of which *urbanitas* had been the cornerstone. Martial summed it all up in a laconic sentence: *maxima Roma terit*, mighty Rome grinds us down.<sup>84</sup> This gigantism was the urban fruit of cosmopolitanism: Lucan saw these crowds generated by all these migratory movements as "the scum of the universe,"<sup>85</sup> while Juvenal, anti-Semite, Syriophobic and Hellenophobic, did not recognize his city anymore.<sup>86</sup> As Jean-Pierre Néraudau et Luc Duret write, "*urbanitas* ... was impracticable in the 'slimy city' of Romulus."<sup>87</sup>

In fact, the solution to this "unurban urbanism" – to urbanism as infringement to urbanity – was brought by Vitruvius.<sup>88</sup> While Cicero persisted in the ethical, philosophical, and rhetorical presuppositions, Vitruvius, while remaining Ciceronian, turned these dogmas towards the practice of architecture, towards his *techné*. In other words, he made urbanity possible; he restituted, in the field, its nobility. Despite the apparent divorce between the *Urbs* and urbanity, he drew from that urbanity lessons of urbanism. He knew how to go beyond the dashes of spirit, the witticism, and the bon ton, transcending them and transferring their substance into his art. What is a jest, after all? A jest is a speech containing an alliance of consequence (*consentaneum*) and inconsequence (*dissentaneum*), of logic and illogic; it comes down to either a discordant concordance, or a concordant discordance. In a word, it is an isosceles triangle whose tip is the *acumen*, the base its matter, and the two sides are the two antithetic thoughts. The register of *mirabilia* allows us to draw an episode well known to the Romans: when the Colosseum was inaugurated, by Titus at the 80 AD games, in the arena, a ferocious lion spared the small hares that played safely around its jaws. This paradox was illogic (*dissentaneum*). It clashed with the lions' legendary cruelty, or that lion was the property of the Caesar. Metaphorically, the Caesar was himself a superb and generous lion on

82 Propertius, *Elegies*, II, 10, 1sq.

83 Ulpianus, *Digest*, I, 15, 2.

84 Martial, *Epigrams*, X, 58, 6.

85 Lucan, *Pharsalia*, VII, 403-405: "... stat tectis putris avitis / in nullos ruitura domus, nullogue frequentem / cive suo Romam sed mundi faece repletam."

86 See Stéphane Itic, "Le grec et le refus du grec dans la poétique juvénalienne," *Ars Scribendi* 4 (2006): 1-16.

87 Luc Duret, Jean-Pierre Néraudau, *Urbanisme et métamorphoses de la Rome antique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, collection *Realia*, 1983), 345.

88 On Vitruvius and rhetoric, see Pierre Gros, "La rhétorique des ordres dans l'architecture classique," *Colloque sur la rhétorique*. Calliope I (= Caesarodunum, XIV bis) (Paris, 1979), 333-347; see also F. E. Brown, "Vitruvius and the liberal Art of Architecture," in *Bucknell Review* XI, 4 (1963), 99 sq. According to Pierre Gros, Brown shows that one of the major accomplishments of the Vitruvian project, in his compilation *De architectura*, is to have established architecture as an *ars liberalis* in its own right, and more precisely, to have given it the discipline and the flexibility of rhetoric, which in this time was a means of expression as well as a way of thinking.

the side of impertinent and helpless poets like the author of this jest, Martial. This account allows him to celebrate the imperial clemency in a consensual manner. This was the logical side of the construction (*consentaneum*). By virtue of the complicity between the microcosms and the macrocosms, it was natural that the lions were as benevolent as the human god who owned them. In fact, the poem opens with a paradox and rested in an imperial praise: in nature, of course, a lion never spares its victim. But in the *orbis* of the arena, which is a miniature *orbis terrarum*, the contrary is legitimate as the lion belongs to the emperor: “How can a famished lion spare a prey at its mercy? But it belongs to you, they say: so it can.”<sup>89</sup> We owe the explanation of this triangular structure to the Polish humanist Mathias Casimir Sarbiewski (Fig. 1):<sup>90</sup> this play with the inconsistencies, the deformities, and the rectified paradoxes, is a feature of *urbanitas*, founded on the equilibrium, the symmetry, and the refusal of the grotesque. As *urbanitas* is a classical principle, it keeps us from the lures of the imagination, and from mannerist biases; here, the paradox of the generous lion is quickly rectified: the emperor is *magnanimus*, and not his creature.

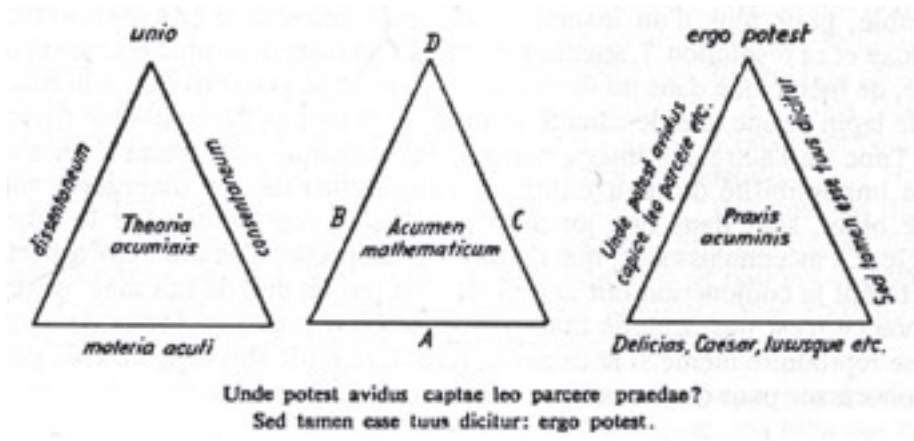


Fig. 1. Mercedes Blanco, *Les rhétoriques de la pointe: Baltasar Gracián et le conceptisme en Europe*

We can see, the architecture of the sententious jest – which is one of the spearheads of urbanity – is in fact a reflection on the proportions, and Vitruvius is the theoretician of this equilibrium in the architectural domain. In the same manner, he detests the paradoxical creatures, the monsters and the chimeras,<sup>91</sup> and he always takes pleasure in granting *symmetria* to nature and truth.<sup>92</sup> Let us attempt to see how Vitruvius makes possible the *urbanitas*. Quintilian’s text cited above (VI, 3, 17) substantially stated that urbanity detested the strange elements that appeared to mistreat the unity of a work.

Architecture is the art of *membra disiecta* as the very principle of construction is to unify the diverse, unless we imagine integral forms, made of a single matter. Quintessentially Vitruvius. First and foremost, even before speaking of technique, his method consists in gathering the

<sup>89</sup> Martial, *Epigrams*, I, 14: “Unde potest avidus captae leo parcere praedae ?/ Sed tamen esse tuus dicitur : ergo potest.”

<sup>90</sup> Mathias Casimir Sarbiewski, “De acuto et arguto liber unicus siue Seneca et Martialis”, *Praecepta poetica*, edition St. Skimina, Cracovie, 1958 [manuscript from 1626]. The scheme comes from the book of Mercedes Blanco, *Les rhétoriques de la pointe: Baltasar Gracián et le conceptisme en Europe* (Paris: Champion, 1992), 175. The example of Martial’s epigram is taken from page 174. We are paraphrasing the arguments and adding our own.

<sup>91</sup> Vitruvius, *De architectura*, V, 173, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Louis Callebaut, “Rhétorique et architecture dans le De Architectura de Vitruve,” in *Le Projet de Vitruve. Objet, destinataires et réception du ‘De Architectura’*. Actes du Colloque international de Rome (26-27 mars 1993), Publications de l’École française de Rome, 1994, 31-46.

“dispersed parts”<sup>93</sup> of a tradition in order to fuse them into a single organized and functional body. In practical terms, the concept that presides over this fusion is ordinance<sup>94</sup> or *ordinatio*, the architectural equivalent of *compositio*. The ordinance seeks an organic unity achieved by the commensurability of the *membra* or *partes*, but it refers to their dialogue among each other, as well as to their relation to the totality. It involves a *taxis*, an disposition,<sup>95</sup> which can only make sense if the ordinance itself obeys a balanced rhythm. Thus enters the concept of *eurythmie*,<sup>96</sup> which is at the same time a “beautiful appearance” (*uenusta species*) and an appropriate disposition in the different parts<sup>97</sup> (*commodusque in compositionibus membrorum adspectus*) of the building, and the organic thought of its components. There is no disposition without composition, the latter being undoubtedly a more globalizing and more “overseeing” function, and certainly being the Latin equivalent of the Platonist *sustasis*, which assumed a necessary harmonic relation between the parts, and of each part with the ensemble.<sup>98</sup> Looking at the Latin jest that warrants *urbanitas*, we can observe that it mostly obeys this ideal of commensurability of parts. These parts come together briefly at the top of the building that constitutes the *acumen*.

The aim of this demonstration is clear: if *urbanitas* sits uncomfortably in the Rome of the social consequences of urbanization, if an author such as Cicero suffered, socially as well as an esthete, from the urbanistic anarchy, and if he fought against it, the *urbanitas* that he theorized and that Quintilian reinstated, ended up flowing into a competing art, becoming one of the principles of the immense Vitruvian project that translated rhetoric in terms of *res aedificatoria*. It is not the question of reexamining the relations between the *ars dicendi* and Vitruvianism. It is only the opportunity to establish a working hypothesis: if the Ciceronian *urbanitas* was hostile to urbanism, Vitruvius is nonetheless the artisan of their reconciliation.

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93 “particulas errabundas” (*De architectura*, IV, pr. 1).

94 Vitruvius, *De architectura*, I, 2, 1.

95 Louis Callebat writes about “functional suitability” (“pertinence fonctionnelle”: *Op. cit.* p. 36). The *dispositio* refers equally to structuration and to ordering of the parts of the work.

96 Vitruvius, *De architectura*, I, 2, 1.

97 This definition is rephrasing a passage from Cicero's treatise *De officiis*, I, 28, 98.

98 This does not exclude “syncopated rhythm” (“*rythme syncope*”) or “optical disruptions” (“*ruptures optiques*”) given by the “shadowed spacing between the volumes” (“*vides ombreux entre les volumes*”). This is the *asperitas* (see III, 3, 9). I borrow the expressions in quotation marks from Pierre Gros, “Structures et limites de la compilation vitruvienne dans les livres III et IV du *De architectura*”, *Latomus*, 34, 1975, p. 986-1009.

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Fig.1: Mercedes Blanco, *Les rhétoriques de la pointe: Baltasar Gracián et le conceptisme en Europe* (Paris, Champion, 1992): 175.