

THE PYTHAGOREAN INSCRIPTION
ON ROSA'S LONDON
'SELF-PORTRAIT'

The inscription on Salvator Rosa's 'self-portrait' in the National Gallery in London (Pl. 30)¹—'Aut tace aut loquere meliora silentio' ('Either be silent or say something better than silence')—has rarely received extensive consideration in the literature on the painter.² Yet an artist as attached to ancient themes as we know Rosa to have been, would surely have intended his motto to be taken not as a mere personal invention, but the expression of a classical way of thinking. The lack of scholarly attention given to Rosa's inscription probably stems from the fact that not only is it unrecorded in any of the contemporary emblem books or collections of proverbs,³ but there is also a complete absence of parallel or related sayings in classical Latin.⁴

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National Gallery.⁵ Stobaeus writes (iii.34.7): Πυθαγόρου. Ἐλεγε δὲ Πυθαγόρας Χρὴ σιγᾶν ἢ κρείσσονα σιγῆς λέγειν ('From Pythagoras: Pythagoras said one ought to be silent or say something better than silence').⁶ The close connection with Rosa's motto is evident. The sole difference is the imperative of the London motto. A saying in this form, however, is to be found in Stobaeus seven lines above (iii.34.1): Ἡ λέγε τι σιγῆς κρείττον ἢ σιγῆν ἔχε ('Either say something better than silence or be silent').⁷ In philological terms, the London motto presents itself as a Latin fusion of the Pythagorean dictum, Stobaeus iii.34.7, and the 'inverted' version of Rosa's imperative, Stobaeus iii.34.1.

Above all the fact that Stobaeus names Pythagoras as the author gives this explanation a high degree of probability—a point I shall return to later. Of minor importance is a question that still remains unanswered: did Rosa know any Greek?⁸ The artist's distinguished circle of humanist friends in Florence could have easily helped him arrive at a knowledge of these sayings, and at the formulation adopted in his painting. Rosa's efforts, in letters, poems and works of art, to use Greek texts and to introduce Greek words and phrases, indicate how highly he valued the language⁹ and how much he wanted to be admired for his familiarity with it. At the same time there were available at this period a number of parallel (Greek-Latin) editions and Latin translations of Stobaeus's *Anthologia*.¹⁰ None of these provides

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⁹ See e.g. the inscription ἦν μοι νότι on the self-portrait in New York; also Rosa's letter to Ricciardi of 16 Sep. 1662 (G. A. Cesario, *Poesie e lettere di S. Rosa*, Naples 1892, ii, p. 119): 'Lessi subito la vita d'Apollonio composta da Filostrato con mia particolare soddisfazione per quel che s'appartiene alla curiosità; ma non ci ho trovato quello, ch'ella mi significò, che ci averia trovato di singolare, e stravagante per la pittura, essendo fatti, che quasi tutti darebbono in una cosa medesima, onde ti prego a propormi qualch'altra cosa, acciò vi potessi trovar cose più fuori dell'ordinario, avendovi però notato alcuni fatti per servirmene.' Even small references in his correspondence show how Rosa aimed at Greek erudition: letter to Ricciardi, 4 June 1664 (Cesario, op. cit., p. 123), 'Vi ricordi, che val più un solo verso d'Omero che un intero poema d'un Cherilo [= Choirilos]'. The question of the degree to which Rosa was acquainted with classical literature is beyond the scope of this paper. My examples have been chosen to indicate the impression of learning the artist hoped to make on his circle and on the public in general.

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a) Othmar Luscinius (Nachtrag), *Senarii gnaianici quingenti et eo amplius versi, singuli moralium quandam sententiam aut typum proverbialium prae se ferentes*, Strasbourg 1515, only Stobaeus iii.34.1: 'Aut prorsus taceas, aut sermonem ede silentio meliorem'—the translator has inverted the two halves of the sentence, thus presenting it in the form of Rosa's inscription!

Cardinal was Delminio's first protector and remained faithful to him until the end of his stay in France. Delminio wrote a commentary on the poems of Petrarch, another of his favourite authors,⁶⁰ and in the *Idea del teatro* (new version) his 'La Morte', whose title corresponds with one of the most important themes, carries numerous allusions to Petrarch. Rosso's beautiful drawing could also have been intended as an illustration to Petrarch's poetry.⁶¹

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patron saints of the Abbey of Cluny, of which the Cardinal was the titular Abbot: Béguin (as in n. 9), p. 165.

⁶⁰ On 8 Mar. 1533 Delminio received a ten-year privilege for his edition of a 'Petrarca novo con l'artificio di Giulio Camillo' (M. Sanudo, *Diarii*, lviii, Venice 1903, col. 115). The date of this privilege is very close to that of the Oxford drawing. The second volume of Delminio's *Opere*, published by Gabriele Giolito and dedicated to Count Sertorio di Collalto di Francesco Patrizi, included, with certain other treatises by Delminio, 'L'esposizione sopra al primo e secondo sonetto di Petrarca'. For the problem of Delminio's interpretation of Petrarch and the Aldine edition of the *Rime* (*Le cose volgari di Messer Francesco Petrarca, impresse in Vinegia nelle case di Aldo Romano con le annotazioni di Giulio Camillo*), see Stabile (as in n. 21, p. 228), who reviews the state of the question.

⁶¹ J. Byam Shaw, *Drawings by Old Masters at Christ Church*, Oxford 1976, i, pp. 66f, no. 125, thought Rosso's drawings might relate to a project for a fresco decoration to be combined with the stuccoes. Carroll (as in n. *), p. 208, prefers to associate them with a tapestry, and certain Renaissance tapestries do in fact carry long passages of text (see p. 212 n. 1). This theory is contested by McAllister Johnson, as I have pointed out (see above, n. 59).

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us with an exact model for Rosa's motto, but this does not argue against their relevance. The artist's talent in creating verbal variations is evident in his poetry and in many of the inscriptions to his prints.

Pythagoras himself features more than once in the works of Rosa. In his satire *La musica* he commends the ancient philosopher as a singer who (unlike those of his own day) encouraged youth to chastity:

Ma chi m'adita in questa nostra età
Un cantor che à *Pittagora* simile
La gioventù riduca a castità? (ll. 82–4)

Then there are the two paintings, executed as a pair in 1662: *Pythagoras and the Fishermen* (Berlin) and *Pythagoras Emerging from the Underworld* (Fort Worth). In the letter about these to his friend Ricciardi he seemed to affect at once pride in the originality of his subject-matter and a disparaging attitude towards their hero. As he puts it:

I have finished the two pictures I was working on, the subjects of which are entirely novel, never touched on before. I have painted on one canvas ... Pythagoras by the sea-shore surrounded by his sect, paying some fishermen for the net which they are pulling in, so as to set the fish free again, a theme taken from one of the essays of Plutarch. The other is when the same man, after spending a year living underground, at the end of it emerged, awaited by his sect, men and women

alike, and said he had come from the Underworld and had seen there the soul of Homer and Hesiod and other deceptive rubbish typical of those simple-minded times ...¹¹

Yet the apparently dismissive phrase used to describe the claims of Pythagoras, 'coglionerie affettatorie',¹² is perhaps only a rather crude attempt to compensate for the proud words in which Rosa has just described the new subjects he has devised. It need not prevent us from supposing that, whatever his view of the philosopher's precepts, he chose Pythagoras to exemplify the early 'golden age' of Stoic philosophy. He might in fact have wished to indicate the circumstances in which a sage like Pythagoras was able to teach in early Greece and southern

¹¹ Letter to Ricciardi, 29 July 1662, in Cesareo (as in n. 9), ii, p. 118; also A. de Rinaldis, *Lettere inedite di Saluator Rosa a G. B. Ricciardi*, Rome 1963, p. 141, no. 107, whose transcription of the text runs: 'Ho concluso i due quadri, che stavo lavorando, i soggetti de' quali sono del tutto e per tutto nuovi, nè tocchi mai da nessuno. / Ho dipinto in una tela di palmi 8. per lo lungo *Pitagora* lungo la riva del mare corteggiato dalla sua Setta in atto di pagare ad alcuni pescatori una rete, che stanno tiranno [= tirando], a ciò si ridia la libertà a i pesci, motivo tolto da un opuscolo di Plutarco. / L'altro è quando il medesimo, dopo esser stato un anno sotterranea abitazione, alla fine d'esso, aspettato dalla sua Setta, così d'huomini, come di donne, uscì fuori e disse venir dagli Inferi, e d'haver veduto colà l'anima d'Homero, d'Esiodo, ed altre coglioniere appettorie di quei tempi così dolcissimi di sale. Queste due opere l'ho fatte per esporle, alla fine di quest'altro mese, alla festa di S. Giovanni Deccollato: di quanto succederà, ne sarete puntualmente avisato.' On *appettatorie* see below, n. 12. For the paintings see H. Langdon in *Saluator Rosa*, exhib. cat., London 1973, pp. 33f, under no. 36 and pl. 37; *Kimbell Art Museum. Catalogue of the Collection*, Fort Worth, Texas 1972, pp. 76–80; and Roworth (*Pictor succensor*, as in n. 2), pp. 290–3, though her translation of the last passage is misleading (p. 292).

¹² I have been unable to find a suitable translation for de Rinaldis's *appettatorie*—nothing in the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* under *appettare* or *appettato* seems to make sense here. It has been proposed to me that the word should be taken as *appettatorie*, but Prof. Edgar Radtke of Heidelberg, who has kindly discussed the matter with me, considers this unlikely. Instead he suggested the reading *appet[ti]torie*, which would, however, yield a considerable change in meaning. Since I have had no opportunity to check the original text of the letter I have here, provisionally, adopted the old reading given in L. Ozzola, *Vita e opere di Saluator Rosa*, Strasbourg 1908, p. 140, even if this is not completely satisfactory.

b) *Apophthegmata ex variis auctoribus per Ioannem Stobaeum collecta Varino Camerte interprete*, Rome 1517, repr. Cologne 1530 (Latin translation only, without Greek text): only Stobaeus iii.34.7, 'Pythagoras. oportet tacere vel silentio meliora dicere'.

c) *Ioannis Stobei Sententiae ex thesauris Graecorum delectae, quarum auctores circiter ducentos & quinquaginta citat, & in sermones sive locos communes digestae, nunc primum a Conrado Gesnero Doctore Medico, Tigurino, in Latinum sermonem traductae, sicut Latina Graecis e regione respondeant*, Basle 1543: Stobaeus iii.34.1, 'Aut dic aliquid silentio melius, aut sile' (as 'Euripidis'); and iii.34.7, 'Pythagoras dicebat, aut oportere silere, aut afferre meliora silentio'.

d) Michael Neander, Basle 1557, follows the translation of Gesner, as do most of the later editors (e.g. Canterus): Stobaeus iii.34.7, 'Pythagoras dicebat aut oportere silere, aut afferre meliora silentio'.

e) *Dicta Poetarum quae apud Io. Stobaeum exstant. Emendata et latino carmine reddita ab Hugone Grotio*, Paris 1623: Stobaeus iii.34.1, 'Silentio ni melius quid portas, tace' (as 'Incertus'; iii.34.7 is missing in this edition, which concentrates on the fragments of poets).

Italy. Pythagoras, according to his ancient biographers, found a context in which his admonitions were appreciated, and proved of 'natural' efficacy. This felicitous harmony between philosophical teachings and 'instinctive' obedience to those teachings on the part of the philosopher's followers may well have constituted for Rosa the notion of a happier past. It is not unlikely that the artist—in the wake of the Stoic view on the origins of philosophy¹³—saw this 'antiqua credulitas' (Seneca),¹⁴ the benevolent naivety with which people trusted and obeyed the early *sapientes*, as a *positive* trait of the epoch in which Pythagoras taught. For it was this naivety which, according to the doctrine of the Stoics, actually enabled men like Pythagoras to get their teachings across—in the case of Pythagoras by the use of his highly characteristic 'symbolic' method of instruction.¹⁵ These people were indeed 'dolcissimi

di sale', but it was precisely this unspoilt disposition that ensured the effectiveness of Pythagorean philosophy. Rosa's motive for painting the two works might thus be closer to classical thought than first impressions would indicate.

Even if Rosa's comments are taken as essentially negative, the words of someone who looks at Pythagoras as an entertaining (not to say ridiculous) figure,¹⁶ it should be remembered that certain aspects of the Pythagorean 'way of life' already aroused irritation in antiquity. Seneca's mildly ironical account of reactions to his Pythagorean vegetarianism is a famous example.¹⁷ Thus, the attitude of amused distance to Pythagoras itself has a classical tradition.

Rosa also mentions the custom among Pythagoras's pupils of remaining in absolute silence for three to five years. He does so in a way that shows he was well acquainted with this habit.¹⁸ The rule of silence in the school of Pythagoras is indeed well-attested and seems to have been almost proverbial.¹⁹ But

¹³ Cf. especially Seneca's letter xc.5–6: the reign of the *sapientes* was a natural one; their subjects accepted their admonitions and teachings because they were (quasi instinctively and through natural gift) aware of their correctness. For the free translation of Seneca's *aetas aurea* letter (xc) by Rosa's friend Evangelista Torricelli see Langdon (as in n. 2), pp. 190f.

¹⁴ Seneca, *De constantia sapientis*, ii.3: 'excussa iam antiqua credulitate', where he contrasts ancient simplicity and the cruelty of present times. It is a further case in point that Seneca uses the word 'credulitas' in his slightly ironical account of his own Pythagorean phase (*Epistolae*, cviii.21). He probably saw his enthusiastic Pythagorean beginnings as a first step towards Stoicism—not a false step, but a stage which had to be passed and left behind.

¹⁵ 'Ergo brevis illa et compendiosa docendi ratio vocatur συμβολική': O. Casel, *De philosophorum graecorum silentio mystico*, Giessen 1919, p. 58. Pythagoras's skill in 'dressing up wisdom [of the Egyptians]' (E. H. Gombrich, 'Icones symbolicae', in idem, *Symbolic Images. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London 1972, p. 144) had the double function of making his message attractive and preventing it from profanation. 'Symbolic actions' such as those which Rosa chose for his Pythagorean paintings were likewise favoured by the Cynic school; cf. the episode of Diogenes throwing away his cup, which Seneca expressly admired in his *aetas aurea* letter (*Epistolae*, xc; cf. above, n. 13) and which was painted and etched by Rosa (R. M. Wallace, *The Etchings of Salvator Rosa*, Princeton 1979, pp. 257–60, no. 103). Roworth (*Pictor succensor*, as in n. 2, p. 292) is perfectly right in stressing the cynic qualities of Rosa's Pythagoras. It may be noted that the Latin inscription on Rosa's Diogenes print exhibits a characteristically

independent choice of words which appears to have no close parallel in the ancient sources about the anecdote (available in G. Giannantoni, *Socraticorum reliquiae*, ii, Rome 1983, nos 156–62, 175, 191, 298, 536, 543). This inscription too reflects a search for originality.

¹⁶ This is the position of the catalogue entry for a second version of 'Pythagoras and the Fishermen' in the Kunsthau Zürich: see C. Klemm, *Die Gemälde der Stiftung Betty und David M. Koetser*, Zürich 1988, p. 124.

¹⁷ Cf. Seneca, *Epistolae*, cviii.22. It is revealing to find that certain passages in which Rosa criticises or mocks particular customs of classical antiquity have close parallels, of similar intention, in ancient philosophical writings. For example, Rosa's 'Era Dea sin la febre, e a' suoi pericoli / Si facean sacrificij' (*L'Invidia*, 177f, in Cesareo, as in n. 9, i, p. 291), looks very much like Epicetetus, *Discourses*, i.19.6: 'Ἐξελαθῆναι ὅτι σε δεῖ θεραπεύειν καὶ ὡς πυρετὸν καὶ ὡς χολέραν καὶ βοῶν στήσαι, ὡς ἐν Ῥώμῃ Πυρετοῦ βοῶμός ἐστιν' (cf. also Cicero, *De legibus*, ii.28).

¹⁸ 'Vi diedi Aviso della Comparsa del sig.r Ugo, nè da quel hora in qua hò ha[v]uto mai più nuova di Voi: che Domine sarà con tanto silenzio? Che volete forse farvi Scolare di Pitaghora? Ma parliamo d'altro': letter to Ricciardi, 28 Oct. 1651 (Cesareo, as in n. 9, ii, p. 88); already mentioned without precise reference in Langdon (as in n. 2), p. 190.

¹⁹ A list with quotations from antiquity and the Renaissance is provided in E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, Oxford 1980, p. 53 n. 4. To this can be added Seneca's letters lii.10 and xc.6; Clement of

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in the wider complex of philosophical or
wise retention of speech, ἔχεμυθία, εὐκαιοῦς
σιγή²⁰—about which Rosa says:

Il silenzio in un uomo è una virtù, la più loquace
che possi decantar le sue glorie.²¹

It is within this context that we should
seek to understand Rosa's motivation in
using the Pythagorean saying. Because he
naturally could not expect the ordinary
viewer to identify the motto of his picture as
a very precise reference to a specific classical
source, Rosa presented more than one way
of reading the painting (and likewise its
companion-piece in Hartford). First—but
not foremost—it functions as a self-portrait,
while the Hartford picture represents his
mistress Lucrezia. This aspect, however, was

probably incidental for Rosa: he and Lu-
crezia simply provided the most easily avail-
able subjects.²² Of greater importance is the
concept of philosophical silence which the
beholder could recognise, without necessar-
ily understanding all its implications. Pre-
senting the typical appearance of a painted
Seicento philosopher, Rosa poses as the
representative of philosophy while, as was
recognised long ago,²³ Lucrezia embodies
Poetry. An attentive viewer could go a little
further: connecting 'philosophical silence'
with 'Pythagoras' such a viewer might have
recalled classical references to Pythagoras
as the *inventor* of the word 'philosophy'.²⁴
A select few, the 'experts', would have con-
nected the picture's motto with the saying
from Stobaeus. Rosa's quotation *qua* quo-
tation was thus perhaps nothing but a per-
sonal message to a friend.

The complicated process by which a
Greek saying turned into a Latin inscription
for a picture has, as far as I am aware, no
parallel in the period.²⁵ Even in Rosa's other

Alexandria, *Stromata*, v.11.1; and Apuleius, *Florida*, 15, which is worth quoting here: 'Nihil prius discipulos suos docuit [sc. Pythagoras] quam tacere, primaque apud eum meditatio sapienti futuro linguam omnem coercere, verbaque, quae volantia poetae appellant, ea verba detractis pinnis intra murum candentium dentium premere. Prorsus, inquam, hoc erat primum sapientiae rudimentum, meditari condiscere, loquitari dediscere'. The two poetical descriptions of pictures representing Pythagoras in the *Anthologia graeca* (xvi. 325 and 326) have already been noted by Wind, as well as Lessing's paraphrase ('Warum dies Bild nicht spricht? Es ist Pythagoras'). On Pythagorean silence cf. also W. Burkert, *Weisheit und Wissenschaft. Studien zu Pythagoras, Philolaos und Platon*, Nuremberg 1962, pp. 162f. The Pythagoras madrigals of Marino are briefly discussed by M. Albrecht-Bott, *Die bildende Kunst in der italienischen Lyrik der Renaissance und des Barock*, Wiesbaden 1976, p. 82. The inscription of René Boyvin's 'Pythagoras' (A. Robert-Dumesnil, *Le peintre-graveur français*, viii, Paris 1850, p. 55, no. 92) is 'Pythagoras Samius laudasse silentia fertur, / Pythagorae vera est numquid imago: tacet'.

²⁰ Cf. R. Waddington, 'The Iconography of Silence and Chapman's Hercules', this *Journal*, xxxiii, 1970, pp. 248–63. There is a bibliography on all aspects of 'silence' in U. Schmitz (ed.), 'Schweigen', *Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie*, xlii, 1990, pp. 43–58.

²¹ *Salvator Rosa, Il teatro della politica. Sentenziosi afforismi della prudenza*, ed. G. Baroni, Bologna 1991, p. 98, no. 822 (I am indebted to Jonathan Scott for this reference). Roworth, 'Salvator Rosa's Self-Portraits' (as in n. 2), p. 140 (cf. her n. 42), quotes further antique sayings connected with silence from the painter's notebook (this notebook was still unpublished when she wrote her article).

²² Cf. Roworth, 'Salvator Rosa's Self-Portraits' (as in n. 2), p. 118: 'While the National Gallery painting may incorporate the artist's idealised features, it must primarily be understood as an allegorical figure'. E. T. A. Hoffmann grasped Rosa's 'method' very precisely: 'Man merkt es, daß Ihr selbst Euer reges lebendiges Modell seid, indem Ihr, wann Ihr zeichnet oder malt, vor einem großen Spiegel die Figur darstellt, die Ihr auf die Leinwand zu bringen im Sinne habt!'—'Der Tausend! Antonio', rief Salvator lachend, 'ich glaube, Ihr habt schon öfters, ohne daß ich es eben gewahr worden, in meine Werkstatt gekuckt, da Ihr so genau wisset, wie es darin hergeht?' (E. T. A. Hoffmann, Signor Formica, pp. 778f of his novel *Die Serapionsbrüder*, edn Munich 1976).

²³ For the most recent survey of the picture's history and that of its companion-piece cf. J. K. Cadogan, *Wadsworth Atheneum Paintings, II: Italy and Spain*, Hartford 1991, pp. 213–16.

²⁴ Cf. Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, v.8–10 (Herac-
lides is named as the source; cf. H. B. Gottschalk, *Herac-
lides of Pontus*, Oxford 1980, pp. 29–31); Diogenes
Laertius, *Vitae*, i.12; Isidore, *Origines*, xiv.6.31.

²⁵ I have identified one case in the Cinquecento of the use of painted mottoes which were taken from Stobaeus's *Anthologia*. We find them on the tablets held by two Greek celebrities on the ceiling of Zuccaro's 'Stanza della solitudine' at Caprarola. Annibale Caro's

Latin inscriptions there seems to be nothing more than—at best—a certain eclecticism

conchetto for this room (A. Caro, *Lettere familiari*, ed. A. Greco, i, Florence 1957, p. 239) gives to Euripides the motto 'Qui agit plurima, plurimum peccat'. The Greek original is preserved only in Stobaeus (*Anthologia*, iv.16.13): ὁ πλείστα πράσων πλείσθ' ἁμαρτάνει βροτῶν. The *tavola* of Menander, 'Virtutis et liberae vitae magistra optima solitudo', is also, in a remarkably free translation, derived from Stobaeus (*Anthologia*, iv.15.5—the preceding chapter!): Ἄρ' ἐστὶν ἀρετῆς καὶ βίου διδάσκαλος / ἐλευθέρου τοῖς πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ἀγρός.

in the use of ancient sources. But perhaps this case will lead to further explorations and further discoveries.

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Salvator Rosa, 'Self-portrait'. London, National Gallery (*pp.* 278–83)