

St. Paul's Letters and Classical Culture

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St. Paul's letters often make use of popular literary, rhetorical, and philosophical conventions from the Classical tradition. Scholars debate about the extent of Paul's knowledge of Greek rhetoric.¹ However, his familiarity with and use of popular convention do not require that Paul studied deeply in any rhetorical school but merely imply that he studied topics introduced universally in Greek schools and drew on material which would have been available to anyone moderately steeped in Greek culture, which Paul clearly was.²

Much has been written about the influence of the diatribe on Paul, particularly in the Epistle to the Romans. The diatribes which have been compared with Paul are usually from philosophical discourse such as that of Bion and Epictetus, philosophers who often invent straw men with whom they have a running discourse. Paul also often seems to carry on a question-and-answer discourse with an invisible opponent. But the search for a model for diatribe in Paul should be widened to include the satires of Horace³ and Paul's contemporary Persius, and the moral essays of their contemporary Seneca, each of whom invents bullying characters who harangue the narrative speaker. The influence of this kind of diatribe, found in the satires of Horace and Persius, may be seen most clearly in the opening chapters of Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galatians.

¹ See Schellenberg 2013, Collins 2008 2-3, Kennedy 1999, 148-151. As a sign that Paul's use of non-Jewish sources has sometimes been underrated, consider the 14-page "Index of Scripture and other Ancient Texts" in Kim's 2002 study of Paul (322-336), where the only listed non-scriptural citations are "Dead Sea Scrolls, Targum, Philo, Josephus, Mishnah, and Early Christian Writings." Compare also the very short list of "Classical Allusions" in the index of the exhaustive study by Sanders 2015, 826-827.

² Because of space limitations, the issue of Paul and philosophy will not have much place in this paper. For further discussion see, for example, the bibliography in Troels Engberg-Pederson, 2000. On the issue of Paul's education see now the important study by Roland Hock in Sampley 2016., Vol. I, pp. 230-253.

³ See Hooley, 2007, "Diatribe" 37 sqq., Bultmann 1910, 64 sqq. "Der Stil des Paulus und die Diatribe." On Paul and diatribe satire also Smith 2005, 1-17.

In Romans 7 Paul describes the helplessness of human initiative to fight the onslaught of sin. In the milieu of tragedy and literature which can be loosely called tragic, the complete loss of personal initiative, similar to that of a person rendered immobile by passion, puts the individual in a helpless situation which he is unable to break out of, in fact his very efforts may increase the victim's distress. Particularly in Senecan tragedy contemporary with Paul, the victim of anger or passion loses everything as he or she is led into a trap. This concept is familiar from the stage but also found everywhere in popular literature: Paul and his audience would immediately have thought of Oedipus, Ajax, Medea, Thyestes, Heracles.

Paul's beautiful hymn to love in I Corinthians 13 also comes from a rhetorical context. While the concept ultimately goes back to the debate on love in Plato's *Symposium*, Paul's passage is an exquisite encomium for which parallels can be found in authors as diverse as Isocrates, Cicero, Apuleius, and Philo of Alexandria. All of these encomia were initially given guidelines by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, who shows how to praise a character by pointing out the negative characteristics of others who might have been supposed to be equal to him. Paul transforms this kind of encomium into something sublime.

Paul's use of stereotypes in I Corinthians 7 (the married and unmarried person) and Romans 14 (the strong and the weak Christian) also is perhaps based on an Aristotelian system found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and continued most vividly by Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus in the *Characters*. Paul talks about the typical behavior of a married man, an unmarried man, and a "weak" and strong man. Theophrastus discussed his view of the limitations of a married man in his book *On Marriage* unknown except for the quotes from it in Jerome's *Against Jovinian*. Paul's reference to characters who may be predicted to act in a certain way mirrors the Greek system of ethics developed by Aristotle and Theophrastus, and later echoed on the stage in the caricatures of Greek New Comedy (*The Bad Tempered Man*, *The Superstitious Man*, the miser in Plautus *Pot of Gold*) whose exaggerated antics delighted audiences.

Each of these topics will now be explored in more detail.

Influence of Diatribe on Paul

Paul has a broad connection with his Greek readers and audiences due to his elementary knowledge of rhetoric.⁴ Paul has a distinctive way of engaging personally in his epistles with an opponent or someone he is trying to persuade, and in this

⁴ See R Schellenberg 2013, ch. 1, "From Unschooled Tentmaker to Educated Rhetorician," 17-56; Kennedy 1999, 148-151.

he shares the marks of a rhetorical background not only with Seneca but especially, as Bultmann and Stowers have shown, with the philosophical discourses of Epictetus and the satires of Horace. To base his style on that of the classics was second nature for the student. Paul was trained in an educational system in which the prospective writer was urged to carry with him a treasure-trove of models, drawn from the best authors, on which he could draw when he wrote; as Quintilian advises in his treatise on oratory,

There can then be no doubt that he [the student] must accumulate a certain store of resources, to be employed whenever they may be required. The resources of which I speak consist in a copious supply of words and matter.

(Quintilian *Instit. Orator.* 10.5, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

The diatribe style originating in philosophy has the author debating with an imaginary interlocutor; Porter has an interesting layout of Romans 3.1-8 which shows how that passage can be reduced to diatribe form.⁵ This style is also characteristic of the Roman satirists Persius and Juvenal who sometimes hammered home their points by debates with imaginary opponents.⁶ Ultimately the justification for inventing the persona of an opponent as the main speaker develops his argument, goes back to the dialogues of Plato where the main speaker rarely simply lectures but engages his opponent into dialogue, forcing conversions out of him. In the white-heat exchanges of the diatribe tradition, the most direct way of attacking a contemptuous opponent is by angrily turning on him with an epithet. Paul in Galatians 3.3 pleads with the Galatians, "Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?"⁷ Juvenal in Sat. 2.12 sqq. complains that the outward appearance of hypocritical homosexuals argues for an *atrocem animum*, a fierce spirit, but their secret lives of homosexual vice, revealed in a physical examination by their physician, prove them hypocrites. In Galatians 5.12 Paul, exasperated that the Galatians have begun to listen to arguments that Christians should be circumcised, suddenly expresses the wish that the members of the circumcision party would "castrate themselves." This is the diatribe convention of turning your opponent's own words back on them. The device is paralleled in Juvenal *Satire 2* where an immoral man delivers a speech wearing a diaphanous toga. The satirist turns on him: "Speak naked. Insanity is less shameful [than what you are doing]" (Juvenal *Sat.* 2.71). In both Paul and Juvenal the narrator's disgust at the advice pushed by his opponents comes out in his exasperated urging that

⁵ Porter 2016, 76-77.

⁶ Bultmann 1910 *passim* 1-63; Stowers, 1981.

⁷ Biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard version, except where noted.

they take their behavior to such an extreme that everyone would immediately see its absurdity.

It should be added that Paul's actual preaching as an itinerant proselyte must often have involved angry confrontation, and it is likely that these confrontations influenced the combative style that we sometimes encounter in his epistles.⁸

Paul's epistles have all the urgency, the rush, and the personal touches associated with pleading with a hostile, or potentially hostile, audience. It has been said about another popular preacher, Maximus of Tyre, that the circumstances of oral presentation, often leading to interruption, led to the abrupt methods used in written argument as well.⁹

The debate on morality in Romans 1 and 2, in particular, turns on the irony of the diatribe. In Romans 1.28-32 the speaker argues that God has given up those who practice immorality to a debased mind. Then In Romans 2.1 Paul suddenly puts down someone who denounces wickedness by calling him "everyone who judges" and contending that he is doing the same things of which he accuses others. Ironically Stowers (1981), who writes eloquently about Paul and diatribe, does not see a conflict between points of view here but argues that Romans 2. 1-5 sharpens the indictment against the same group who were accused in 1.28-32, and in 1994b claims that "According to Paul, God himself ordained that the Gentiles be punished by enslavement to their passions (1.24,26,28)..."¹⁰

Schreiner in his commentary argues that the attack in Romans 1.18-32 is against the Gentiles while in 2.1 Paul turns on the Jews,¹¹ and Schreiner, like Stowers, claims that the judgment against the Gentiles in 1:18-32 is that of "Paul himself." Since Schreiner believes that the opinions of 1.18-32 are those of Paul, he has to find a reason why Paul himself is not among those condemned in chapter 2 for "judging the deeds of Jews and Gentiles as evil..."¹²

⁸ Barrett 1957, 43 argues that some of the arguments in Romans may have first taken place "in the course of debates in synagogue or market place."

⁹ Sandy 1997, 103.

¹⁰ Stowers 1981, 110: "The function of 2:1-5 is to bring home, to concretize and to sharpen the indictment in 1:18-32 (especially verses 28-32) for Paul's audience. It takes the indictment of "them" in 1.18-32 and makes it into a personal indictment of any of the audience to whom it might apply." See further Stowers 1994b, 202.

¹¹ Schreiner 1998, 79: "Paul first indicts the Gentiles (1.18-32) and then the Jews (2.1-3:8)... The emphasis in the whole section, however, falls on the Jews..." Cf. p. 81, 103. So also Collins 2008, 189: "Having convinced Christian Jews of the perversity of Gentiles, Paul turns the tables..."

¹² Schreiner 1998, 107: "Paul himself judges the Gentiles as deserving of God's wrath in 1:18-32."

It is more probable, however, and more consistent with the method of the diatribe, that 2.1, far from reinforcing the hostile indictment of 1:18-32, responds to that indictment in order to make a general statement about the hypocrisy of those who make moral judgments, turning their own fault-finding against them¹³ in a manner consistent with the warning of Jesus, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matth. 7.1-3). This would then account for the otherwise puzzling "therefore" of 2.1, where the argument is "Because you harshly judge others, *therefore* God's judgment on you will be all the harsher." If read this way, the condemnations which end the first chapter are seen in a startlingly different light. Those who mercilessly condemn others are not reporting the will of God but inviting the wrath of God to fall on them for their lack of mercy. This is also a common technique of the diatribist who turns the opponent's objection back on him. Stowers¹⁴ lists a number of instances from Epictetus, Dio Chrysostom and others, where the narrator suddenly turns on the interlocutor, often addressing him as *o anthrope* as Paul does. It should be noted in these examples that the interlocutor is actually assigned a speaking part, (e.g. "Yet where am I to get a rough cloak that looks well? Man, you have water, wash it!" Epictetus *Diss.* 4.11.33-34, quoted Stowers 1981, 88), The voice of Romans 2.1, "Therefore you have no excuse..." turns on the moralizer of 1.24-32, but in 2.2 the moralizer makes a reply, (prefaced by the NRSV by the words "You say,") attempting to reassert the validity of his negative judgments. "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." The moralizer is then rebuffed again starting in 3.3, "Do you imagine, every man who judges..." (NRSV: "Do you imagine, whoever you are...") The moralizer who wants to pronounce the judgment of God on sinners is thwarted at every turn.¹⁵

It is a commonplace that the accuser of immorality is often chided in diatribe "like a dimwitted schoolboy,"¹⁶ and not aware that he is guilty of the same crimes that he detects in others. Persius, Paul's contemporary, in Sat. 1.44 uses a similar phrase "Whoever you are," to refer to the imaginary opponent he has created in

¹³ So also Johnson 2001, 37: "... judging another (in the sense of condemning them) is itself an act of 'insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness' (1.30)." The condemnation of those who make moral judgments is virtually a commonplace in popular philosophy; compare Juv. *Sat.* 2. 38-39 "Our age is lucky to have you in charge of morals." Compare also Seneca *De Vita Beata* xxvii.1.4: "But as for you, have you the leisure to search out others' evils and to pass judgment on anybody?" (trans. John W. Basore).

¹⁴ Stowers 1981 chapter 2, "Address to the Imaginary Interlocutor" 79-115.

¹⁵ For a good example of the interlocutor offering a second objection after the first rebuttal, see Seneca's *De Ira* I.iii,1-2: "We often get angry" someone rejoins... : "But" our friend replies...: (trans. John W. Basore). Compare the imaginary opponent's repeated interruptions in *De Ira* II. 32-33.

¹⁶ Bultmann 1910, 14.

debate, and he condemns an opponent in Sat. 2 with words similar to Paul's "Who are you fooling? To whom are you singing these evasions? The joke is on you and you are wasting away in your folly" (Persius *Sat.* 2.19-21). Often in satire it is the *alazon*, the boaster, who dominates the poem. In Horace *Serm.* 2.3 the critic Damasippus holds the stage in a long critique of the poet, Horace, accusing him of various moral flaws, while at the end (326) Horace turns on his critic to claim that Damasippus himself is guilty of worse insanity than that of his victim. Horace disliked the Stoic propensity for strictly interpreted and harshly enforced laws.¹⁷ Like Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is also in part a rhetorical and moral model for Paul, Horace prefers the mean, the moderate character between two extremes. In diatribe satire, as sometimes in Paul's letters, the buffoon gets the loudest voice but his inability to see his own imperfections is always exposed. The entire "indictment of human wickedness and injustice" (NRSV) in Rom 1.18-32, confident in its repeated assertion (1.24, 26, 28) that God "gave up" sinners to their impurities, is saturated with the bombast of the hyperbolic speaker.¹⁸ Paul's presentation in Romans 2.1 of the inadequacies of judgmentalism does away with easy answers, and creates in the epistle a clean slate on which to develop the arguments which follow.

I Corinthians 13: The Encomium on Love

The hymn to love in I Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous and oft-repeated passages in Paul's epistles, and it seems to stand by itself as a perfect gem of style.¹⁹

The most effective way to approach this hymn is to see it as an example of an encomium, a common rhetorical device studied and used by many ancient writers. The encomium was included in the *progymnasmata* which were part of Greek students' exercises in composition in New Testament times.²⁰ The encomium follows certain norms.²¹ Aristotle in "Rhetoric" 1.9 points out that the most effective way to praise someone is to contrast his achievements with those of others:

¹⁷ See e.g. Hooley 2007, 45 (in reference to Horace *Sermo* 1.3. 117-118).

¹⁸ Anderson 1999, 287-288 speculates about the reason for the use of bombastic and affected language in Rom. 1.28-31. I suggest that the exaggerated language which Anderson thinks may be aimed at the homosexual life-style is instead aimed at the self-righteousness of the speaker.

¹⁹ On the function of Paul's encomium to love as an antidote to factionalism, see Mitchell 1991, 165-171.

²⁰ See Kennedy 1984, 22-23, and Hock in Sampley 2016, 247-248.

²¹ Sigountos 1994, 246-260.

If he does not furnish you with enough material in himself, you must compare him with others, as Isocrates used to do, because of his inexperience of forensic speaking. And you must compare him with illustrious personages, for it affords ground for amplification and is noble, if he can be proved better than men of worth. [39] Amplification is with good reason ranked as one of the forms of praise, since it consists in superiority, and superiority is one of the things that are noble. That is why, if you cannot compare him with illustrious personages, you must compare him with ordinary persons, since superiority is thought to indicate virtue.²²

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1 Aristotle presents an encomium of friendship which follows his own advice of stressing the insufficiency of other virtues, and thereby offers some of the elements found in later writers, such as superiority to other goods (wealth alone would not offer a sufficient reason to live if it were not accompanied by friendship), and its universality (friendship is found everywhere and it is suitable to every age).²³ Paul is one of many who were influenced by this Aristotelian advice in writing an encomium. Indeed Greek rhetoricians urged their students to use their encomia to praise virtues as an elementary exercise.²⁴ Particularly influential was Aristotle's injunction to spell out the negative qualities of the person whom you are praising so that the listeners will be all the more convinced that your man is outstanding. Writers of encomia quickly learned to make such comparisons of virtues as well as of people.

Here is Paul's encomium on love:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the

²² Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.9 trans. J.H. Freese. See Forbes 2016, 196-199. Forbes' article is useful on the subject of Paul and rhetorical comparison, but offers no detailed analysis of the encomium on love in I Cor 13.

²³ Discussed by Penna 1996, 196.

²⁴ This is established in the important article by Sigountos 1964, 248. (see the expanded argument by Hock in Sampley I (2016) 247-248 though Hock repeatedly misspells Sigountos as "Segountos.") Sigountos' article is missing from the bibliography of Forbes 2016, where it might have been expected. Anderson 1999, p. 254, offers some arguments against I Cor 13 as an example of an encomium, but it does not seem to me he has weighed the evidence carefully, especially in claiming that no other ancient examples of encomia are "as short" as I Cor 13; the Cicero and Isocrates passages I quote, for example, are of comparable length.

poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹²For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

This set piece of Paul's, universally judged to be a masterpiece and used in weddings over and over, is a gem drawn from the masters of the classical tradition. It can be seen that the power of love is greatly enhanced by Paul's showing that other admirable qualities such as eloquence, prophecy, faith, and generosity become valueless unless combined with love, following the advice of Aristotle found in the tradition which holds that we cannot see the virtue of a person unless we show his superiority to otherwise seemingly admirable people. After applying this method to giving charity a kind of divine status overshadowing everything else, Paul elevates it even further, elevating love to a quality we will know fully only when we pass into another world. Here Paul approaches the majesty of Diotima's message to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*:

[210e] said she, 'give me the very best of your attention.

'When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils.'²⁵

²⁵ Trans. Harold N. Fowler.

In both Plato and Paul, the quest for love reaches a state where partial glimpses of love finally pass over into the ultimate love which goes beyond words, a love truly divine.

The rhetorical effectiveness of the encomium on love is so carefully worked out that it may well be the sign of a set piece previously composed by Paul and inserted here into the epistle. It includes assonance and internal rhyme, verse 1: “clanging cymbal” (κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον), chiasm, verse 4: “love is patient/kind is love” (Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη), antithetical parallelism, verse 6: “love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth” (οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συνχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), triple parallelism and internal rhyme, verse 8: “But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away” (εἴτε προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλῶσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνῶσις, καταργηθήσεται), triple repetition, verse 9: “in part-in part-in part”, verse 11: “as a child -as a child-as a child”, and triumphant ending on the key word, verse 13:²⁶ ἡ ἀγάπη. Particularly moving is its glimpse of the rewards waiting for us in the future when we shall see “face to face.” The interlocking of sound and verbal patterns, and the lofty theme, leave the listener breathless.

Penna²⁷ points out that another example of an ancient encomium can be found in Philo *The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* VI (35) sqq.,

But labour is the enemy of laziness, as it is in reality the first and greatest of good things, and wages an irreconcilable war against pleasure; for, if we must declare the truth, God has made labour the foundation of all good and all virtue to man, and without labour you will not find a single good thing in existence among the race of men... (VII,37) For, choose whatever good thing you please, and you will find that it owes its existence and all its strength and solidity to labour. Now, piety and holiness are good things, but still we are not able to attain to them without the worship of the gods, and the worship of them is combined with perseverance in labours... (40) You see, therefore, that all good things spring up and shoot out from labour as from one general root, and this you must never allow yourself to neglect; for if you do, you will without being aware of it, be also letting slip the collected heap of goods which it brings with it... For as those persons who are desirous to live must not neglect food, so also they who are anxious to attain to good things must pay due attention to labour, for what food is to life so labour is to virtue.²⁸

²⁶ See also Perkins 2012, 153.

²⁷ Penna 1996, 195-196.

²⁸ Trans. Yonge, 2013.

The Philo passage, it can be seen, mirrors Paul to some extent in showing how all other good things grow out of and are dependent on the virtue which is being highlighted. Other parallels which have been cited are from the Apocrypha, including the praise of wisdom in The Wisdom of Solomon 7.7 sqq., and the praise of truth in I Esdras 4. 34-40.²⁹

But Paul could have found a more formal and precise rhetorical model for the stylistic details his encomium on love in the great masters of Greek and Latin oratory. A close parallel is Isocrates' praise of wisdom in his speech *To Demonicus*. The passage begins by listing the virtues of other qualities, all of which fall short of wisdom or are useless unless they are combined with wisdom.

[6] For beauty is spent by time or withered by disease; wealth ministers to vice rather than to nobility of soul, affording means for indolent living and luring the young to pleasure; strength, in company with wisdom, is, indeed, an advantage, but without wisdom it harms more than it helps its possessors, and while it sets off the bodies of those who cultivate it, yet it obscures the care of the soul;

Then in the next paragraph Isocrates argues that virtue occupies even a higher category than wisdom:

ἡ δὲ τῆς ἀρετῆς κτῆσις, οἷς ἂν ταῖς διανοίαις συναυξηθῆ, μόνη μὲν συγγηράσκει, πλούτου δὲ κρείττων, χρησιμωτέρα δὲ εὐγενείας ἐστὶ, τὰ μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀδύνατα δυνατὰ καθιστᾶσα, τὰ δὲ τῷ πλήθει φοβερὰ θαρσαλέως ὑπομέγουσα, καὶ τὸν μὲν ὄκνον ψόγον, τὸν δὲ πόνον ἔπαινον ἡγουμένη.

[7] But virtue, when it grows up with us in our hearts without alloy, is the one possession which abides with us in old age; it is better than riches and more serviceable than high birth; it makes possible what is for others impossible; it supports with fortitude that which is fearful to the multitude; and it considers sloth a disgrace and toil an honor.

Here we find a rhetorical climax rivaling that of Paul: virtue lasts for a lifetime, carries with it all the value of great riches, is better than high birth, is consistent with aristocratic values, works best when combined with hard work and even considers hard work an honor. Attention is drawn to all of these noble values by the skillful interplay of the last lines, where the internal rhyme and plays on words (*adunata dunata, oknon psogon, ponon enainon*) draw the listener's eyes and ears

²⁹ Penna *op.cit.* and Meeks 1972, 41 n.6.

to what is important and leave a lasting impression in the memory, paralleling Paul's rhetorical effects in his eulogy of love which outdoes all other virtues.

Similar effects could be achieved by a great orator in Latin. Cicero's encomium on literature in the *Pro Archia* seems based on the same rhetorical model as I Cor. 13. Cicero sees the study of letters as the pinnacle of perfection that adds the crown on excellence on men whose virtue has already been shown as outstanding. Note Cicero's use of alliteration, assonance, use of triple repetition, the lyric soaring, the comparisons which stress that even the greatest of rivals for the study of literature lack essential ingredients:

...qui profecto si nihil ad percipiendam [colendam] virtutem litteris adiuventur, numquam se ad earum studium contulissent. Quod si non his tantus fructus ostenderetur, et si ex his studiis delectatio sola peteretur, tamen (ut opinor) hanc animi adversionem humanissimam ac liberalissimam iudicaretis. Nam ceterae neque temporum sunt neque aetatum omnium neque locorum: haec studia adulescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfrugium ac solacium praebent, delectant domi, non impediunt foris, pernoctant nobiscum, peregrinantur, rusticantur.

If they [men such as Cato Major and Scipio Africanus] had been able to derive no assistance from literature in the cultivation and practice of virtue, they would never have applied themselves to the study of it. Though, even if there were no such great advantage to be reaped from it, and if delight alone were to be sought from these studies, yet in my opinion you would still judge this diversion to be most humane and most liberal. For other diversions do not belong to every time, every age, every place; these studies nourish youth, delight old age, enhance success, offer a refuge and a solace for failure, delight us at home, are a distraction abroad, spend the night with us, travel abroad, travel to the country.

Cicero *Pro Archia* 12

Paul stresses the omnipresence of love: "Love never fails." Likewise Cicero: The study of literature is appropriate to every place and time. Paul "I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." The same triple emphasis in Cicero: "spend the night with us, travel abroad, go to the country." Paul on the relative lack of value of other gifts: "I can speak in tongues and enjoy every other gift, but am worthless if I have not love." Cicero is parallel in arguing I can have every other diversion but they will all pass away, being suitable to particular times, ages

and places: the study of literature is our constant companion throughout life. Writing as he does with such formidable masters as Isocrates and Cicero, Paul has learned well and transcended his school lessons.

Lucius' fixation on Fotis' hair in Apuleius' *Met.* 2.8, seems a parody of this rhetorical topos, as is Lucian's *Praise of a Fly*. The superficial Lucius fixes on the glory of Fotis' hair as her supremely divine characteristic, a "glory" which would seem especially absurd to a Platonist like Apuleius since Plato suggested that "hair" should be grouped with mud and dirt as a vile and worthless substance.³⁰ This passage is a reminder of how easily an encomium can sink into parody if the quality praised is less than exalted. Apuleius and Lucian's parodies also remind us that by the second century C.E. the encomium had long become a fixed object of study in schools, universally recognized and ready to be made fun of.

If you were to strip the hair from the head of the most extraordinary and beautiful woman and rob her face of its natural decoration, even if she were descended from heaven, born out of the sea, and raised by the waves, (licet illa caelo deiecta, mari edita, fluctibus educata) even, I say, if she were Venus herself, surrounded by the whole chorus of Graces and accompanied by the entire throng of Cupids, wearing her famous girdle, (licet omni Gratiarum choro stipata et toto Cupidinum populo comitata et balteo suo cincta) breathing cinnamon and sprinkling balsam—if she came forth bald she could not attract even her husband Vulcan.

Apuleius *Met.* 2.8

The rhetorical climax here after so much fanfare is the ludicrous image of a bald Venus trying to woo a husband. It corresponds to Paul's "If I speak in the tongues of men or angels" a list of deeds that might seem hugely impressive but are all undercut by their failure to include love which renders them all foolish and useless. Lucian in his *Praise of a Fly* achieves a similarly ludicrous effect by comparing the fly's flight and buzz with those of a bat, locust, wasp, and gnat.

The Law and Sin: The Tragic Hero

In Romans 7.14-25 Paul agonizes over the dilemma in which sin has placed him.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want,

³⁰ Cf. Plato *Parmenides* 130 C-D.

but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

If the premise of Paul's outburst on sin and death can find a moral equivalent in Seneca's letters, it has a tone which puts us more in the realm of tragic laments. The despair depicted by Paul shows that he has shifted his context into the realm of Greek and Senecan tragedy. A tragic lament bemoans the impossible moral situation in which the lamenter finds himself. What could be more maddening a paradox than to do the very things that one does not want to do?³¹ Particularly telling is the sense of being at war with oneself, of having one part of one's being will something and the rest of oneself fighting back against it.

The lament devised by Paul,

ταλαίπωρος ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος: τίς με ῥύσεται ἐκ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου;

wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

(Romans 7.24)

recalls the dilemma of the Greek tragic hero. The tragic association is strongly suggested to us by the word he uses for "wretched," *talaiporos*, a striking and very old Greek word going back to tragedy, and found in Sophocles and Aeschylus.

³¹ Pratt 1983, 53 (of Stoicism): "...although our nature is rational, reason may be perverted. The governing element may make wrong choices."

In *Prometheus Bound* 233 the adjective describes the wretched state of all mortals, where mortality alone, as in Paul, brings with it a state of wretchedness.

βροτῶν δὲ τῶν τάλαιπῶρων
of wretched mortals

And in *Oedipus at Colonus* 14 Antigone uses the adjective to describe her wretched father:

πάτερ τάλαιπῶρ' Οἰδίπους,
wretched father Oedipus

Paul's use of the first person singular in Romans 7 has long been a puzzle; is Paul describing a dilemma from his own life?³² But it is better seen as another of his invented personas. The first person suits a passage where a hypothetical tragic hero laments his own fate, totally wrapped up in his own dilemma. By using "anthropos" which might be better translated as "mortal man" or "human being" the tragic hero stresses his own mortality. The reason for the wretchedness is tied up with his own limitations and powerlessness as a human being, it replaces the tragic word "brotos." The tragic hero cannot reach perfection because he is only mortal.³³

The sentiment is parallel to the famous passage of the lyric poet Pindar:

ἐπάμεροι: τί δέ τις; τί δ' οὐ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἄνθρωπος.
(Pindar *Pythian* 8. 95-96)

Creature of a day. What is anybody? What is anybody not? A human being is the dream of a shadow.

³² Cf. Bruce 2011, 148: "...this autobiographical interpretation of verses 7-13...is the most natural way to understand this section..."

³³ On the connection between Paul's words and tragedy see also Stowers 1994a, 260-264, who draws a connection specifically with the monologue of Medea in Euripides' *Medea* 1077-1080, and in 1994b where he adduces much evidence to show that "speech-in-character" was part of ancient rhetorical training and that readers such as Origen already found it in Romans 7. The parallel with Medea's words is there, but it is not necessary to argue that Paul specifically identified with out-of-control "barbarian women." Other tragic characters such as Oedipus and Thyestes offer a much closer analogy to the dilemma of Paul's individual, "trapped in his own body" as the result of unforeseen consequences of his own actions.

where being a human being is a shorthand for transitory existence, limitation.

In Sophocles, Ajax in his madness slays a herd of cattle, rather than the hated Greeks such as Odysseus who have deprived him of his honor. His intention was one thing, his action another. He now must face a life of shame for which he has no one to blame but himself.

Oh, wretch that I was to allow
 Those cursed foes to slip from my hands, and assaulting
 Horned kine and goodly flocks, madly to spill
 Their life in streams of dark blood!

(Sophocles *Ajax* 373-376)

The right choice was at Ajax's fingertips, but his wretchedness and folly force him to make a choice which is not only wrong, but mad.

In perhaps the most famous tragedy of all, Sophocles' King Oedipus, the blinded Oedipus pronounces sentence against himself. Sight, perhaps the greatest gift of human life, has become an abomination to him. The sight of his own children, loathsome to him because born of incest from their brother's body, become a reminder of the horrors of his mistakes.

In Senecan tragedy with its love for rhetorical excess, paradoxes, and situations in which the individual finds himself caught in an impossible dilemma, we find such a situation in the *Hercules Furens*, in which the hero who has slaughtered his own family laments his loss of madness so that he is forced to face the horrible consequences of his own actions; the sane hero has to face the consequences brought about by the insane hero, who is still the same person. In the *Hercules Furens* he grieves the loss of his children, for which he has no one to blame but himself. In Hercules' case, the paradox is that he longs to flee from his troubles, but can find no refuge where he will be safe from them.

The most horrific kind of tragic dilemma is when one's own body is in rebellion and seems to conspire to make deliverance impossible. Thyestes, the unfortunate hero of Seneca's *Thyestes* who has eaten his own children, longs to embrace them, but ironically they are too close to him to allow embracing, in fact part of his very self. The horror of the wrongdoing of Thyestes effectively cancels out any possibility of a human feeling in suffering. His situation outdoes all other horrors:

Wretched me! What expressions can I come up with, what laments?
 What words will be enough for me?

(Seneca *Thyestes* 1035-1036)

Such tragic paradoxes are found also outside of tragedy. It is very easy for writers in various genres to fall into a “tragic mode.” Attis in Catullus’ epyllion 63, castrated and now a woman, faces the horrors of having done an act which, in a sane state, he never would have dreamed of:

Miser ah miser, querendum est etiam atque etiam, anime.

Oh wretched and double wretched me, now and now again I grieve what I have done, my spirit!

Catullus 63.61

Not only the “wretched” recalls Paul, but also Attis’ sting of repenting an action for which none but oneself is responsible.

Narcissus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* falls in love with his own image and is victim of the kind of irreconcilable paradox we have been discussing. Narcissus longs to possess the image he sees, but again with the crashing irony that he himself is the actual image he sees, and one cannot possess what one already has.

What is it I implore? The thing that I desire is mine—abundance makes me poor. Oh, I am tortured by a strange desire unknown to me before, for I would fain put off this mortal form; which only means I wish the object of my love away. Grief saps my strength, the sands of life are run, and in my early youth am I cut off; but death is not my bane—it ends my woe.—I would not die for this that is my love, as two united in a single soul would die as one.

Ovid *Met.* 7. 463-471.

The fact that Narcissus can possess the very thing he longs for is both his blessing and his curse. Paul’s free will is of no help to him, for he cannot do what he wants and ends up doing what he does not want. Caught in this dilemma both Narcissus and Paul wish to be delivered from the very body which brings them death.

“I do not do the things I want, but the things I do not want are what I do:” so laments the wretched victim of his own passions created by Paul with his most Senecan or pointed style. It is one thing to be caught in a difficulty: it is another, maddening in the extreme, to be in a difficulty in which your most well-intentioned efforts only worsen the situation.

Thus Medea in Seneca’s tragedy (see above), both repents of the crime of killing her children, and rejoices over it.³⁴

³⁴ Pratt 1983, 89, argues that that conflict is more rhetorical than real since evil has taken over in Medea’s soul.

Why do you delay now, my soul? Why hesitate, even though you have the power? Now has my wrath fallen away. I am sorry for my act, ashamed. What, wretched woman, have I done? – wretched? Though I repent, I have done it! Great joy sneaks up on me against my will, and behold, it is increasing.

Seneca *Medea* 998-992

And Ovid's version of Medea in his *Metamorphoses* puts it even more succinctly;

Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor.

I see and approve what is better, but what I do is the worse.

Ovid *Met.* 8.20-21³⁵

The gods can change the story, and break through the seemingly invincible will and stubbornness of the tragic victim, caught in a dilemma that his own will cannot solve. Note the ambidextrous ability of Heracles to stand in some tragedies for the suffering hero and in others for the divine man who is able to find a way to rescue the man who suffers. Thus Heracles appears to Philoctetes at the climax of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (1410 sqq.) to tell him that he does not see the whole picture. The reality which seems so apparent to him will be reversed. Those whom he sees as his enemies will prove his friends, the gods will lead him to success, and his loathsome wound will be healed. The *deus ex machina* (including various gods appearing in other plays) arrives in time to cut through the knot, to show how the seemingly irreconcilable extremes can be brought together by surrendering to the will of the gods.

Paul's hypothetical tragic victim can cry out, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord," indicating that God has sent Jesus, a kind of *deus ex machina* like Heracles, to cut the knot; yet the dilemma is still there: the rescued victim obeys the law of God with his mind but the law of sin with his body. Jesus has moved him up to a new level of understanding where he can live with the imperfect reality, the conflict of body and soul, but do so joyfully and without self-condemnation in his obedience to God.³⁶ To this extent Paul has found a way to live with and simultaneously break through the torture and paradox of the tragic hero.

³⁵ Barrett 1957, 147 also cites this Ovid passage.

³⁶ Sanders, who emphasizes that Paul is a "black and white thinker," is troubled that Paul seems to "cancel the thanksgiving" which he triumphantly proclaims in 7.25a: "I do not know of a really good explanation for the placement of 7:25b after the thanksgiving for God's rescue operation, and so I shall not offer one" (Sanders 2015, 655).

Paul and the Classification of Character Types

Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* develops his arguments under the assumption that people have certain character traits which presuppose them to act in a certain way. Here are a few examples:

The self-indulgent man, then, craves for all pleasant things or those that are most pleasant, and is led by his appetite to choose them at the cost of everything else; hence he is pained both when he fails to get them and when he is merely craving for them (for appetite involves pain); but it seems absurd to be pained for the sake of pleasure. (3.11)

Now virtuous actions are noble and done for the sake of the noble. Therefore the liberal man, like other virtuous men, will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time...

But most prodigal people, as has been said, also take from the wrong sources, and are in this respect mean. They become apt to take because they wish to spend and cannot do this easily; for their possessions soon run short....Hence also most of them are self-indulgent; for they spend lightly and waste money on their indulgences, and incline towards pleasures because they do not live with a view to what is noble. The prodigal man, then, turns into what we have described if he is left untutored, but if he is treated with care he will arrive at the intermediate and right state. (4.1)

Now the man is thought to be proud who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them...The proud man, then, is an extreme in respect of the greatness of his claims, but a mean in respect of the rightness of them; for he claims what is in accordance of his merits, while the others go to excess or fall short. (4.2)³⁷

Paul occasionally falls into the Aristotelian method of seeing people as character types who are bound to act a certain way. The married man is a perfect example of someone to use whose possible spiritual bent is canceled out by his constant need to consider the needs of someone else.³⁸ This comes out clearly in I Corinthians where Paul debates at length the advantages of marriage and celibacy.

³⁷ Translated by McKeon 1947,

³⁸ See Stauffer in Kittel 1964, 1. 648-657 .

I Cor. 7. 27-28, 32-34

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that...

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit, but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. (29) I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none... (31) for the present form of this world is passing away.

Note that Paul does not list the problems that are consequent on marriage, but describes the behavior of the married man and married woman, as though these were personality types into which people merge when they are married. Marriage has the inevitable effect on people of turning them away from the most important matters (how to please the Lord) to less important matters (the affairs of the world and how to please one another).

Another instance where Paul generalizes character types is in his consideration of the "weak" man and his dietary choices. The weak or superstitious man is an example of someone whose need to consider laws or regulations not only dissociates him from a man from to make his own moral choices, but puts him in the company of a vegetarian follower of the Jewish law.

Romans 14.2

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them...(14.5) Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. (15.1) We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.

Here the “weak” are not necessarily “Jews” who observe dietary laws, or Jewish Christians who are still observing the Torah, but the morally weak as in Rom. 5.6, I Cor 8,7, 9F.³⁹ Compare Epictetus 1,8,8 where the “weak” consider externals to be of greatest importance.

The notion of analyzing moral qualities by analyzing the characters in whom they are embodied comes from Aristotle. Compare Aristotle,

With regard to truth, then, the intermediate is a truthful sort of person and the mean may be called truthfulness, while the pretence which exaggerates is boastfulness and the person characterized by it a boaster, and that which understates is mock modesty and the person characterized by it as mock-modest. With regard to pleasantness in the giving of amusement the intermediate person is ready-witted and the disposition ready wit, the excess is buffoonery and the person characterized by it a buffoon, while the man who falls short is a sort of boor and his state is boorishness.

Nicomachean Ethics 2.7⁴⁰

The philosopher Theophrastus, Aristotle’s successor in Athens, expands on Aristotle by showing the often comic consequences of behaving in an exaggerated way. Some of his examples recall St. Paul talking about the married man and the superstitious man, which are fairly easy types to caricature.

Theophrastus, *Characters* 16: the Superstitious Man

The superstitious man is one who, if anything dirty touches him, will wash his hands, sprinkle himself with water from a holy fountain, and walk about all day with his mouth stuffed full of bay leaves... And on the fours and sevens of the month (i.e. the 4th, 7th, 14th and 17th) he instructs his household to put wine on to boil...

Characters 3: the Chatterer

The Chatterer is the sort of man who sits down beside someone he doesn’t know and begins by delivering a panegyric on his own wife.

³⁹ For the parallel between the Romans “weakness” passages and the argument in I Cor. 8-10 see Robert Karris “The Occasion of Romans” in Donfried 1991, 65-84. On the issue of dietary laws in Romans 14 see e.g. Bruce 2011, 246-251.

⁴⁰ Translated by McKeon 1947.

Characters 17: The Chip on the Shoulder, or the Man with a Grievance

When his sweetheart is caressing and kissing him he says to her, "I wonder if you genuinely love me as much as you seem to." If he finds a purse in the road he says, "But a fortune—no! I've never found *that*."⁴¹

Moreover Theophrastus, according to Jerome, in addition to his famous work on "Characters" wrote a "golden book" on marriage, in which he argued that marriage is incompatible with philosophy. The preoccupations of marriage are one long list of trivia distracting the husband from what is important. Here again we see the close proximity in Theophrastus to philosophical analysis of character and the humor of comic characters.⁴² According to Jerome, Theophrastus argues that marriage might work out under ideal conditions, "if the woman is beautiful, virtuous, and from a good family, and he himself healthy and rich,"

But all these things rarely coexist in a marriage. Therefore a wise man should not marry. For, first, marriage impedes the pursuit of philosophy, nor may any man serve both books and a wife...Then, all night long, the nagging complaints...It is hard to support a poor [wife], a torment to put up with a rich one.

The types which preoccupy St. Paul, the married man and the superstitious man, were of particular interest as types in comedy. That marriage is a threat to an ascetic life goes back to Socrates having to face the complaints and sometimes assaults of his wife Xanthippe, a conflict which is also noted with some emphasis in Jerome's *Against Jovinian*.⁴³ In Plautus, the *Menaechmi* is an exposé of a terrible marriage in which Menaechmus I is kept by his wife from all his pleasures and has to face her constant nagging. Whether the wife is a nagging figure or a demanding figure, marriage is often seen as an unwanted distraction.

Paul acknowledges these problems, using a phrase that recalls his own "thorn in the flesh," when he states that

⁴¹ Translations of Theophrastus' *Characters* are by Vellacott 1967.

⁴² Translation of Theophrastus' "Book on Marriage" from Jerome *Against Jovinian*, Hanna and Lawler 1997, 150. See also the analysis of the passage by Elizabeth Clark in Smith 2005, 157-158.

⁴³ See the quotations from Jerome in Hanna and Lawler 1997, pp. 176-177, where the famous story is told of Xanthippe pouring dirty water on her husband's head, and Cicero is quoted as saying that he could not devote himself equally to a wife and philosophy.

θλίψιν δὲ τῆ σαρκὶ ἔξουσιν οἱ τοιοῦτοι, ἐγὼ δὲ ὑμῶν φείδομαι.

Such men (those who marry) will have distress in the flesh, and I would spare you that.⁴⁴

The necessary evil is an old story in Greek culture; the poet Semonides had lamented “Women are an evil thing; but yet, my friends, one cannot live in one’s house without some evil.”⁴⁵ Yet Paul will not go as far as Semonides, Theophrastus or the comic poets. By emphasizing that “those who marry do not sin,” he absolves the married man from the culpability which would be implied in his being an object of mockery or humor. There is the same emphasis in the discussion of the “weak” in Romans 14. Rather than ridicule the “weak” man for his superstitious insistence on counting lucky days or avoiding certain foods, he insists that people who are “strong” in their faith must respect the differences of their weaker brothers (Rom. 14.1) “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes about opinions.” To welcome a man as a brother is more important than risking alienating him by exposing the errors of his opinions. Though there may be truth in the stereotypes of married men or superstitious men, Paul stresses that they are all welcome in the household of God.

The Paul of the Book of Acts adapts to his audience when he reaches out to the Athenians by citing an inscription which he has witnessed in the agora, and by reciting a few passages from Greek literature. Though the Paul in Acts is an imaginary character whose behavior is no proof of the behavior of the real Paul, that character in this instance follows the psychology of the Paul of the letters. Paul in his letters draws on conventions with which his readers would have been familiar by discussing sin as though it were a tragic dilemma, by employing conventions drawn from the popular diatribe, by using the encomium, a convention used by pagans and Jews alike, and raising it to a new height of sublime eloquence as he singles out Christian love, and by discussing the issues of married love and of superstition by alluding to conventions of married love and of superstition on the stage and in popular philosophy.

⁴⁴ The word *thlipsis*, here translated “distress,” is used of the “persecution” of Christians in Acts 14.22. Compare the “thorn in the flesh” that was given Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.7 to keep him humble.

⁴⁵ Smith 2005, 111.

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