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Review of Aldo Scaglione, *The Classical Theory of Composition: From Its Origins to the Present—A Historical Survey*

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**SCAGLIONE, Aldo.** *The Classical Theory of Composition: From Its Origins to the Present—A Historical Survey.* (“University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature,” 53.) Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1972. Pp. viii, 447. \$15.00.

This is more bibliothèque than book. A labyrinthine gold mine, but mapped. It presents theories and ideals of style and composition from Aristotle and Dionysius to Weil and Jespersen. Also Chomsky. The historic sweep stuffs them somehow between two covers, finding and interweaving illustrations for everything, while showing developmental lines. One can read this volume and then see one’s Vergil or Montaigne with new eyes and new appreciation.

One can see developed here the interrelationship of prosaic to poetic composition, and the turning of *ἡ φυσικὴ τάξις*, “the secret of clarity” in Demetrius, into the subject-verb-complement word order of English and the modern European languages. And also see it used in the mouths of Frenchmen explaining why their language is so supremely clear. Considérez, par exemple, le mot audace de Père Le Laboureur: “Cicéron et tous les Romains pensoient en François devant que de parler en Latin.” A bit further in the chapter “France, 1600–1800,” Scaglione preserves for us Rivarol’s frappant: “Quand on lit Démétrius de Phalère, on est frappé des éloges qu’il donne à Thucydide, pour avoir débuté dans son histoire par une phrase de construction toute française.”

Though Scaglione leaves antiquity after 96 pages, the entirety intrigues the classicist, since subsequent theoreticians reprise, develop, or eschew classical models. This book requires a week to read, but the classicist who starts will finish and be led into new thinking about his favorite authors.

A particular charm of Scaglione’s efforts is the easy underlying assumption, at once dulcet and flattering, that the reader is a polyglutton who will devour Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French along with his English. A dash of *Tedesco* would have been a nice bit of steak sauce, but alas, German is almost entirely absent. It is, however, a nourishing and enriching book.