Nihil pulchrius vidi : a neglected idiom

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A Neglected Idiom

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Abstract: Comment exprime-t-on en latin "je n'ai vu personne plus belle"? Certes, on peut dire *neminem pulchriorem vidi*, mais on peut aussi bien dire *nihil pulchrius vidi*, expression idiomatique assez commune, surtout chez certains auteurs, mais pas aussi largement reconnue.
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I can still see him grinning slyly as he tried to stump his former pupil. George Goold and I, along with our wives, were enjoying a picnic many years ago at the Tanglewood Music Festival when he asked me, "Joe, how do you say in Latin 'I have seen no one more beautiful'?" Sensing there was some catch, I replied, even though I was sure I was going to be wrong, "*neminem pulchriorem vidi?*" "No," he said triumphantly, "it's *nihil pulchrius vidi.*" Soon thereafter he sent me several sheets with examples of this idiom that he'd collected. In the intervening years, I've added many others, and also come to realize that the idiom is unfamiliar to many other scholars and readers. To publicize the idiom, instances of which abound in Latin literature, I've composed this article, and to honor my teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend, I dedicate it to his memory. *Eius quod sum, debeo tibi multum: eius quod esse cupio, plus.*

À propos of Plaut. *Men.* 615, *nihil hoc confidentius*, A. S. Gratwick says in his commentary "lit. 'nothing (is) more brazen than this man (abl. of comparison)', the usual idiom for 'no one could be more …'." Not everyone recognizes "the usual idiom," however. Scholars have regularly mistaken or misrepresented it in some way; they fail to recognize it as a distinct idiom. J. B. Hofmann, for instance (*Lateinische Umgangssprache*, § 83), cites it under the heading "Tendency to Use Exaggerated Expressions," not singling it out at all as it deserves, but classing it together with phrases like *moriar, si quidquam fieri potest elegantius* (Cic. *Att.* 4.17.5) and *vero verius nihil est* (Sen. *Nat.* 2.34.2). Kühner and Stegmann (II. 2, p. 466) also underplay the use, which, they say, serves "for especially forceful emphasis": that is not the case. Further signs of the neglect of the idiom, or perhaps ignorance, may be detected in a pair of distinguished Horace commentaries. In his voluminous, exceptionally detailed work, C. O. Brink, on Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.17 *nil oriturum alias, nil ortum tale fatentes*, where with *nil tale* the poet is referring to Augustus, makes no mention of the idiom. Neither do the thorough Nisbet and Hubbard on *Carm.* 1.12.17–18. Both passages are discussed below.

In fact, although the idiom probably did begin as an exaggerated or emphatic form of speech, it quickly turned into a regular idiom – which is to say, a form of

speech that is standard and no longer emphatic. A reasonably full survey of the examples reveals the variety, the distribution, and the stylistic level of the idiom, which have never been explored. Such a survey, moreover, grants insights into some particular passages that have been misunderstood.

Since the first substantial preserved works of Roman literature are comedies, it's not surprising that examples of this originally colorful, emphatic idiom appear early, and indeed in large numbers. Fourteen are found in Plautus.[1]

Epid. 425: *nihil homini amicost opportuno amicius*

Asin. 543: *te quidem edepol nihil est impudentius*

Most. 25: *quid illa pote peius quicquam mulieri* [abl.] *memorarier?*

The rhetorical question hardly differs from a statement made with *nihil.* This particular counter-example can readily be explained:

Men. 1088–1090: *nam ego hominem hominis similiorem numquam vidi alterum, neque aqua aquae nec lacte est lactis, crede mi, usquam similius quam hic tui est, tuque huiius autem.*

By means of the polyptoton *hominem hominis* Plautus has Messenio drive home his point about the similarity between the twins, and that gets echoed in the two comparisons following. Nonetheless, there remain about 50% more examples (twenty in all) with *nemo* (*vel sim.*) than with *nihil.*

Merc. 141: *hominem ego iracundiorem quam te novi neminem*

Persa 565: *nullus leno te alter erit opulentior*

With Terence, several generations later, *nihil* (five examples) draws nearly abreast of *nemo* (six).

Ad. 66: *nil quicquam vidi laetius*

Haut. 255: *quid sene erit nostro miserius?*

In these and all other reckonings I have omitted of course possibly deceptive examples like

Plaut. *Persa* 764: *nihil hoc magis dulce est,*

1 In quoting passages I don't bother to record textual variants that do not affect our understanding of the Latin.

where, as the context makes clear, *hoc* is the embrace the speaker has just received, and

Ter. *Haut.* 699: *at enim istoc nil est magis, Syre, meis nuptiis advorsum,*

in which *istoc* refers to an action, not a person. To avoid muddying the waters, I've also omitted from consideration borderline cases like

Ter. *Eun.* 934: *quae dum foris sunt, nil videtur mundius,*
nec mage compositum quicquam nec magis elegans,

where it's unclear whether the comparison is with the courtesans who are the subject of *sunt* or with the whole scene that's envisioned.

A couple of further examples are found in the remainder of the second century. One comes from the comedian Turpilius, who died old in 103.

com. 80: *nam quid illoc homine vivit confidentius?*

Another, quoted by Cicero, is attributed to a Scipio; which Scipio is unknown.

de Orat. 2.149: *quid hoc Navio ignavius?*

At this point the reader may well pause to ask, What are you fussing about? All the examples cited are just vivid, emphatic phrases, completely comprehensible as "Nothing is more brazen than this man" and "What is more ignoble than Navius?" The comparison is made all the more forceful because the comparanda include the inanimate universe along with the animate. Why do you insist that *nihil* be understood as *nemo*, *quid* as *quis*? The answer is that the comparison with *nihil* occurs so often that it can hardly be considered colorful or vivid or emphatic: if nothing else, repetition would rob it of those qualities. This is certainly true of Cicero, in whose vast ouput the idiom occurs by far the most of all Latin writers, and with whom *nihil* strongly predominates over *nemo*. Nonethless, the two forms of expression do continue side by side down through the ages. (So in replying to George Goold I wasn't completely wrong!) Furthermore, after scrutinizing the examples, I at least can discern no difference between a given author's use of the one and of the other; both are found without discrimination.

In the entirety of Cicero's writings, there are about 37 examples with *nemo*.

Lael. 84: *Catonem meum, quo nemo vir melior natus est*

Epist. 2.3.2: *mihi te neque cariorem neque iucundiorem esse quemquam,*

Against these are to be set about 72 with *nihil*, virtually double. They are scattered across all the periods of his life and all the genres in which he wrote.

Part. 57: *nihil est enim tam miserabile quam ex beato miser*

de Orat. 2.285: *ab hoc* ["after him"] *vero Crasso nihil facetius*

Tusc. 1.5: *nihil mathematicis inlustrius*

Nat. Deor. 1.93: *nam Phaedro nihil elegantius, nihil humanius*

Flacc. 53: *nihil enim illo homine levius, nihil egentius, nihil inquinatius*

Dom. 76: *quid te aut fieri aut fingi dementius potest?*

Epist. 7.10.4: *nihil duobus nobis est stultius*

Att. 5.1.4: *nihil meo fratre lenius, nihil asperius tua sorore mihi visum est*

From a letter that Caesar wrote to him, Cicero quotes a phrase with the idiom:

Att. 9.16.3: *Dolabella tuo nihil scito mihi esse iucundius.*

And yet no further examples are found in Caesar's *commentarii.*

It should be enough now to illustrate briefly the variety of genres and authors in whom the idiom is found, to pause over the interesting cases, and to chart the varying relation between *nemo* and *nihil.*

All three Catullan variations on the idiom occur in the polymetrics.

9.11: *quid me laetius est beatiusve?*

22.12–13: *scurra / aut si quid hac re scitius videbatur*

42.13–14: *o lutum lupanar, / aut si perditius potest quid esse!*

si quid is readily and reasonably understood as equivalent to *nihil est quod* ... One example is found in his contemporary and patron Nepos.

Alc. 1: *constat ... nihil illo fuisse excellentius vel in vitiis vel in virtutibus.*

along with one example with *nemo.*

The idiom doesn't appear in Virgil, but does appear in Horace a few times, and several of the instances call for special comment.

Sat. 1.3.18–19: *nil fuit umquam / sic impar sibi.*

Here we have the idiom pure and simple, *nil* = *nemo.* Elsewhere in the *Satires* we have *nemo*, however.

Sat. 1.6.1–2: *non quia, Maecenas, Lydorum quidquid Etruscos*
incoluit finis, nemo generosior est te.

Two reasons may be suggested for why Horace wrote *nemo* here. The neuter might have led to confusion with *quidquid* (and *quidquid* itself = *quicumque*, another neuter applied to a person!), and, as E. Gowers points out in her commentary, *nemo* here, at the very opening of the second half of the book, echoes *nemo* in 1.1, where Maecenas was also addressed.

Epist. 2.1.17: *nil oriturum alias, nil ortum tale fatentes.*

As indicated above, *nil tale* refers to Augustus. Even in the odes, composed in a higher style, the idiom recurs twice. In the ode beginning *Quem virum aut heroa ... quem deum?,* Horace proposes Jupiter *inter alios* as the subject of his song.

Carm. 1.12.17–18: *unde nil maius generatur ipso,*
nec viget quicquam simile aut secundum.

The neuter is continued in *quicquam*, yet the reference to animate existence remains strong with *generatur*, *viget*, and also *secundum*, if the last alludes to the chance that Zeus might have had a son greater than himself. (The phrase *nil Iove maius* will be taken up by Ovid a handful of times, as we shall see.) That association likely colors the final example from Horace.

Carm. 4.2.37–39: *quo nihil maius meliusve terris*
fata donavere bonique divi
nec dabunt.

The poet here refers, not to Jupiter, but to Augustus – a Jupiter among men, the cast of his language implies.

Propertius shows no examples with *nemo*, one with *nihil* that is secure.

2.9.43: *te nihil in vita nobis acceptius umquam,*

and two borderline cases, 1.6.18, 2.17.9.

The earliest occurrences of the idiom in Ovid are unremarkable.

Ars 3.331: *quid enim lascivius illa?,*

also *Ep.* 20.1. The sole example with *nemo* in all of Ovid is *Met.* 15.599. Curiously, during the remainder of his career he uses our idiom either of Jupiter

Fast. 5.126: *invicto nil Iove maius erat*

Met. 2.62: *quid Iove maius habemus?*

or of Augustus or his wife Livia. Like Horace, he appears to associate the rulers of heaven and of earth both with one another and with the idiom.

Trist. 2.38: *iure capax mundus nil Iove maius habet*

Pont. 1.2.65: *alma nihil maius Caesare terra ferat,*

also *Trist.* 4.8.38, all three referring to Augustus, and, referring to Livia, though with mention of Augustus,

Pont. 3.1.127–28: *qua nihil in terris ad finem solis ab ortu*
clarius excepto Caesare mundus habet.

At *Trist.* 5.8.2, the idiom is applied to an unidentified detractor of the poet.

Whereas in Ovid *nihil* strongly predominates over *nemo*, in Livy, another second-generation Augustan author, the reverse is true.

3.14.5: *nihil iisdem illis placidius aut quietius erat,*

where *iisdem illis* are the tribunes just mentioned, but on the other hand

25.38.7: *imperiis vivorum nemo oboedientior me uno*

also 9.18.1, 27.8.6, 34.60.2, 37.53.27. Let me now introduce three passages from Livy that may be considered borderline. For each one, a commentator offers a remark on the neuter that may be apposite, yet I believe that, had they been familiar with our idiom, they might not have needed to strain in order to explain a phrase that struck them as unusual.

2.55.3: *nihil contemptius, nihil infirmius, si sint qui contemnant.*

The comparison is with the consuls' attendant lictors, who had been mentioned in the previous clause. R. M. Ogilvie in his commentary translates: "no force could be more contemptible or less capable of resistance, if people had but the spirit to despise them." Livy represents the plebs as reflecting on the lictors, who are themselves plebeians, and assessing how easily they could be overcome by their fellow-plebeians. One might simply translate "no people are more contemptible ...".

6.25.10: *vidit ... nihil usquam non pavidis modo sed ne mirantibus*
quidem simile.

C. S. Kraus: "the neuter sums up the preceding list." Here not only are *pavidis* and *mirantibus* of animate gender, but in the long preceding clauses the activities of several groups of people are described – tavern-keepers and customers, artisans,

students, women and children scurrying through the streets. One might translate "nowhere did he see anyone who looked fearful, or even astonished."

5.38.5: *in altera acie nihil simile Romanis, non apud duces, non apud milites erat.*

The "other battle-line" is that of the Romans themselves, who are not behaving the way Romans traditionally do. Weissenborn and Mueller: "[*Romanis*] = *aciei Romanorum* oder *aciei, qualis Romanorum esse solet.*" The paradox and piquancy of Livy's language get somewhat lost with such an explanation. Livy is saying "In the (Roman) battle-line there was no one who was like a Roman," the term now normative rather than descriptive. The sentence is key in Livy's plotting, within Book Five, of the collapse and then the resurgence of the Romans, of their falling away from their true nature and their recovery of the same.

At this point, it seems appropriate to quote just a few more examples and to tabulate for individual authors the numbers with *nihil* and with *nemo*. It will be evident that, with one great exception, the idiom peters out but doesn't disappear. In the following authors neither one is found: Celsus, Columella, Florus, Frontinus, Lucan, Lucretius, Manilius, Persius, Petronius, Pliny the Younger, Sallust, Statius, Suetonius, Valerius Flaccus, Varro, Vitruvius. Here's the table for those authors in whom one or the other appears, or both.

Author	Examples with *nihil*	Examples with *nemo*
Seneca the Elder	3	3
Velleius Paterculus	0	1
Valerius Maximus	1	0
Curtius Rufus	1	4
Seneca the Younger	4	4
Pliny the Elder	1	0
Quintilian	1	1
[Quint.] *Decl. maiores*	4	0
[Quint.] *Decl. minores*	1	1
Tacitus	0	3
Juvenal	2	0
Apuleius	0	1
Gellius	1	0
Fronto	3	1

And here are a few additional examples.

Sen. *Contr.* 1.pr.7: *nihil illo viro gravius, nihil suavius, nihil eloquentia dignius*

Val. Max. 2.17.12: *nihil mitius superiore Africano*

Sen. *Dial.* 4.7.1: *nihil est aerumnosius sapiente*

Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.3: *nihil est peius iis qui ...*

Iuv. 10.278–79: *quid illo cive tulisset*
natura in terris, quid Roma beatius umquam?

Fronto *Ant.* 1.2.1: *nihil umquam prae vobis dulcius habui.*

The one later author of the classical period who employs the idiom frequently is Martial, in whom 20 examples are found, as against only one with *nemo*. C. Williams is certainly alert to the idiom, since in his commentary on 2.54.5 he cites all the examples. Herewith a few of them:

2.71.1: *candidius nihil est te*

4.56.3: *sordidius nihil est, nihil est te spurcius uno*

7.20.1: *nihil est miserius neque gulosius Santra*

8.59.3: *nihil est furacius illo.*

However thin the stream may have otherwise run, it did manage to reach writers of much later ages. Among the medieval Latin songs of the *Carmina Burana*, we read (168 [Scheller] 27–28)

inter choros puellarum
nihil vidi tam praeclarum,

and then in the work of Erasmus, that connoisseur of classical Latin (*Coll. Lat.*, ed. Edwards, 21–22),

nihil illa fidelius,

where *illa* is Penelope.

We are now in a position to judge the stylistic level at which Latin authors placed the idiom. It certainly doesn't belong to the highest style. No examples are found in Roman epic (save one in the *Metamorphoses*), practically none in the Roman historians. Caesar's one example appears in a letter, not his historical writings. Seneca's examples appear in his philosophical works, never his tragedies. Nor, at the other extreme, are examples found anywhere in the technical writers. Cicero, to be sure, uses it much and widely, with examples appearing in all the genres in which he wrote, philosophical treatises no less than speeches delivered before the public and letters written to his friends. Yet the popularity of the idiom in comedy

and epigram and its several appearances in satire suggest that it was somewhat conversational in tone, colloquial. George Goold, had he been a harsh man, in that early conversation might well have said to me, *Nihil te est ignorantius, qui hanc consuetudinem non cognoveris.* My reply: *Nunc quidem cognovi.*

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