IV

GRAVITAS AND MAIESTAS

Five years ago when I published the book *Roman Dynamism*, on the last page, as I had already done in the Dutch edition of 1941, I declared that I was quite aware of a rather venturesome element in my ideas which might quite easily earn the disapproval of certain experts. I added however, that I would welcome and indeed solicited any corrections, any judgments disagreeing with my own, provided they were offered with good will and in the sole desire of eliciting the truth. Hitherto my hopes, or rather my sure expectations, have not been disappointed. On the one hand there have been numerous testimonies of agreement which it is hardly for me to enumerate, nor is this the place. On the other objections perhaps have been equally numerous, including corrections and differing opinions on individual points. Though some of these, it goes without saying, I find difficult to accept, being not infrequently due to misunderstanding of my words, yet there are many cases in which I find that I was mistaken or careless. I have accordingly collected all of these and filed them, with the intention of publishing a retraction as soon as I get a chance.

Now, however, to use words attributed to the divine Augustus in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*, ‘I can no longer hide or contain a grief which shame makes all the more severe’. Recently Georges Dumézil,1 the eminent historian of Roman religion whom I have always highly esteemed, has thought proper to attack me as ‘le plus actif des dynamistes contemporains’, which he does not intend I fear as a title of honour. The picture he paints of my opinions is so wrong-headed and distorted as to drip *ira et studium* from every pore. If it is true that to understand everything is to forgive everything, we need not despair of patching things up between us. For it seems that all this displeasure emanates from one over-hasty judgment of my French colleague. I shall discuss it later. First I must demonstrate the arguments he has produced against my views.

1 *Rev. de Philol.* 26 (1952) 7ff.
The first page of his article I reserve to the end. I begin with the second, where he begins his critical examination of my interpretation of the notions of gravitas and maiestas. I note at once that for unstated reasons he has inverted the order of treatment. First he deals with maiestas, then with gravitas. If we suppose that this is more or less by chance or of small importance, we are making a bad mistake. For this inversion serves my opponent’s purpose of obscuring my real opinion as much as possible. Let us see how he renders my words. I had written on p. 120, at the very beginning of the short sub-section dealing with maiestas: ‘Strictly speaking, this maiestas (māg-īes-tāt-s) or “being greater” does not belong to our present study, but it is difficult to leave it out of our consideration because it is important to observe how, in the long run, this notion either took the place of gravitas or for a long time occupied a place beside it as having a synonymous meaning’. And to avoid the possibility of misunderstanding, at the end, on p. 127, I again declared: ‘It will be clear that, as I have observed at the outset, the word maiestas from its origin does not belong to the complex of mana-remembrances. Yet through the emphasizing of various conditions of might and power it has gradually been amalgamated with it in many respects’.

This is how Dumézil renders this (on his p. 24): ‘M. Wagenvoort n’a donc pas démontré sa thèse principale. D’autre part, en posant que maiestas et gravitas sont synonymes, il a effacé des différences importantes’. Then again in his conclusion on p. 28 he writes: ‘Ainsi, replacés dans l’ensemble de la vie et de la pensée romaines, maiestas et gravitas, loin d’être deux désignations équivalentes d’une variété de force mystique ou de mana, apparaissent comme deux notions distinctes. . . .’

3 My italics.

It is true that in one of his numerous footnotes (p. 19, 9) he hides this rather than he brings it out into the open: ‘Il est remarquable que, dans son utilisation de maiestas, M. Wagenvoort marque quelque réserve, pensant (pp. 119-128) qu’il s’agit d’un terme plus jeune que gravitas et qui même l’aurait supplanté dans certains emplois. . . .; admettant aussi, dans ses dernières lignes (p. 127), que ce mot, en tant que dérivé de maior, n’a pas appartenu dès le début “to the complex of mana-remembrances”. . .’ Dumézil is mistaken. I ‘admitted’ nothing nor was it necessary for me to ‘admit’ anything. Not only in my final lines but at the very beginning I stated that the two words did not mean the same, though occasionally—not everywhere but here and there—they came closer to one another in meaning and almost merged.