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INTRODUCTION

1. THE BACKGROUND

When Domitian was assassinated on 18 September 96, the senatorial class heaved a sigh of relief. In particular, aspirants to literary renown within that élite looked for release from a prolonged (if self-imposed) silence. To be fair to Domitian, he had encouraged poetry and rhetoric: Martial, Statius, and Quintilian all attest his interest and patronage.[1] But neither Martial nor Statius were public figures in the socio-political élite; they had not felt the need to bridle their tongues, or risk the fates of Helvidius Priscus, of Junius Arulenus Rusticus and Herennius Senecio: all were senators (the first two consular), and all died for their imprudent literary productions.[2] But everything changed at the accession of Nerva, and even though his reign was short, his successor in 98, Trajan, did nothing that checked the 'revival' of letters. Pliny is our best contemporary witness of this renaissance, which he hailed in his first book of letters, most of which seem to date from 97.[3] In April of that year he drew attention to the number of recitations of new works (*Ep.* 1.13), and he was clearly eager to start publishing some of his own speeches.[4] It is not so surprising then that another noted senatorial orator should at last take up his pen with a view to writing for publication.

In 97, the year of his suffect consulship, Tacitus too embarked

1 For Domitian's patronage of poetry generally, and his motivation, see A. Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae. Poets, patrons and epideixis in the Graeco-Roman world* (ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 9; Liverpool 1983) 45–7.

2 For the former see note on *offendisse* 2.1 below, for the latter Suet. *Dom.* 10.3–4 and Sherwin-White on Plin. *Ep.* 1.5.3. For Domitian's relations with the Senate, and his victims see Brian W. Jones, *Domitian* (London 1992) 180–92.

3 The actual date and the form of their publication (as opposed to their public recitation), whether by individual book, or groups of books, or of the nine books as a whole, remain matter for debate (see esp. Murgia (1985)).

4 See *Ep.* 1.2, and Sherwin-White's n. on 1.2.6.

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upon a programme of writing, which issued in due course in the publication of the *Agricola*, a biography of his father-in-law, the *Germania*, an ethnography perhaps designed to demonstrate the hollowness of Domitian's claim to conquest of that nation, the *Histories*, and the *Dialogus*.[5]

The *Agricola* and the *Dialogus* are reckoned to form a kind of diptych,[6] which reveals their author's disillusion with the careers open to a Roman in public life.[7] They may be regarded as his attempt to come to terms with and describe for others the emptiness that he himself found at the end of the traditional paths to glory and prestige in Rome, paths which he and his father-in-law had so successfully trodden in their different ways. The *Dialogus* is, to be sure, one of the most brilliant literary performances to have come down to us from antiquity. What makes it poignant, however, is that it betrays the disillusion of a man successful in society's terms, who had awakened at length to a reality at odds with convention. We may detect in the *Dialogus* Tacitus' sense of thwarted effort, when he reflected upon the obsolescence of the skill to which he had successfully, but as he had come to believe, pointlessly, devoted his youth and early manhood. It was an expense of spirit – for Tacitus, his oratorical talent – in a waste of shame (above all, the silence of the Senate when its own good men were hauled to punishment, *Agr.* 3.2). A silent orator is a contradiction in terms. With the death of Domitian, however, some men in public life, like Pliny, began to hope for a revival of oratory (cf. *Ep.* 6.11). Quintilian, for instance, Pliny's teacher (*Ep.* 2.14.9) and the author of a twelve-book treatise on the training appropriate to an orator (it was published in 96), clearly did not think he was wasting his time in recalling men to a Ciceronian ideal of education for public life. Tacitus none the less decided upon reflection that such hopes were delusory, however well-disposed the

5 The ascription of *D.* to Tacitus will be discussed below, §7 Authenticity.

6 For *D.* as the companion piece to *Agr.* (words~deeds) see Syme (1958) 109 n. 5.

7 We have recently been warned to restrict use of the word 'career' in a Roman context (see *OCD* s.v.), but unfortunately no better term is on offer.

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new emperors might prove, and in the *Dialogus* he aimed to give his grounds for pessimism.[8]

Three spheres of public activity (the only activity that mattered) – warfare, statecraft, and the law – were deemed appropriate for a Roman who aspired to realize his potential as a citizen. (Antonius, in Cicero's *De orat.* 1.209–12, rehearses the three with exemplary figures.) Success in any of them, or any combination of them, led to prestige and renown, as well as conferring certain material benefits. Statecraft, however, came to be associated particularly with the power to persuade one's fellow-citizens in the Senate or at a public assembly (*contio*) or in court to adopt one's own point of view, and so for Cicero at any rate eloquence as a general term typified the paramount skill of the statesman.[9] This is exemplified in such lists as we find in the *Dialogus* itself at 28.6, in Cicero's *De orat.* 2.226, 3.136, in Ovid's *Amores* 1.15.4–6 *praemia militiae . . . leges ediscere . . . uocem prostituisse foro*, or in Livy's description of the elder Cato, 39.40.5: *ad summos honores alios scientia iuris, alios eloquentia, alios gloria militaris prouexit* (cf. the elder Pliny, *NH* 7.100 *Cato . . . tres summas in homine res praestitisse existimatur, ut esset optimus orator, optimus imperator, optimus senator*). Livy used similar terms in his description of Licinius, 30.1.5 *facundissimus habebatur, seu causa oranda, seu in senatu et apud populum suadendi ac dissuadendi locus esset; iuris pontificii peritissimus . . . bellicae . . . laudis compotem.*[10] Under the monarchy of the Caesars these traditional

8 Such is the assessment of Syme (1958) 115: 'The *Dialogus* confutes and supersedes Quintilian. There was no cure or remedy, since eloquence itself was obsolete. Tacitus furnishes a political and historical diagnosis'; at (1958) 333 he speaks of *D.* as the epitaph on Roman oratory. Crook (1995) 167–71 is also important.

9 See Douglas's introduction to the *Brutus* pp. xli–xlii for Cicero's ideal. It is worth noting that Douglas reckons we may 'assume' that Cicero would have agreed with Quintilian that the orator must be a good man; in fact, the issue had not crystallized in those terms just yet.

10 It is interesting to note however that the prestige of *iuris prudentia* declined in favour of advocacy (cf. Cic. *Mur.* 30 *duae sunt artes quae possunt locare homines in amplissimo gradu dignitatis, una imperatoris, altera oratoris boni*); Crook (1995) 143 refers also to Quint. *Inst.* 12.3.9 *quod si plerique desperata facultate agendi ad discendum ius declinauerunt, quam id scire facile est oratori quod discunt qui sua quoque confessione oratores esse non possunt.*

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occupations were still needed and rewarded; as Syme (1958) 607 put it: 'Two paths lie open to the highest honours. The one is law and oratory, with diplomatic arts that manage the Senate for the Princeps, with loyal talent to defend Caesar's friends and destroy his enemies in the high court of justice. The other is the administrative or military career.'[11] The roles of both oratory and warfare were, however, becoming reduced in scope; as Syme's formulation makes clear, all men now served the Princeps personally.

Deliberative oratory in the Senate took its cue from the emperor (or his mouthpiece), and did not question his policies; even the loyal Pliny has cause to complain of the Senate's ineffectuality.[12]

Forensic oratory too underwent considerable change in the early principate. The *quaestiones perpetuae*, in which the orators of the Ciceronian age had made their reputations, were largely superseded as jurisdiction came increasingly under direct imperial scrutiny. The business left to *iudices* in the centumviral court seemed trivial, whilst the more politically significant trials were morally compromised by the rise of the *delatores*.[13] On the other hand, it was still the case that a member of the élite might have to rely solely upon himself for his legal protection: witness the dismay of C. Silanus, proconsul of Asia, charged with extortion, bereft of support, having to mount his own defence – *solus et orandi nescius* – against the most eloquent of Asia's orators and before a hostile Princeps (*A.* 3.66–7); or that of Publius

11 See too his essay 'Ministers of the Caesars' in (1991) 521–40, esp. 523–35. These two paths virtually replicate those mentioned to Achilles by Phoenix at *Il.* 9.440–1.

12 See Sherwin-White's nn. on *Ep.* 3.20.10 *haec tibi scripsi . . . ut non nunquam de re publica loquerer, cuius materiae nobis quanto rarior quam ueteribus occasio tanto minus omittenda est* and 12 *sunt quidem cuncta sub unius arbitrio* (cf. *D.* 41.4), with references to 4.25, 2.11.1, 4.12.3, 5.4.1. For a brisk overview of deliberative oratory at this time see Kennedy (1972) 430–4, and for the dreariness of senatorial oratory Syme (1958) 224, 230, 285 n. 4, 330.

13 For changes in jurisdiction see H. Galsterer in *CAH* x 408–9, 412–13; for forensic oratory see Kennedy (1972) 437–42; for *delatores* see *OCD* s.v. maiestas. The still widespread need for skilled verbal presentation of a case (sometimes in the form of written pleadings) is fascinatingly charted by Crook (1995).

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Celer, to whom *neque animus in periculis neque oratio suppeditauit* (*H.* 4.40.3).[14] But in the main trials were not as politically interesting as they had been before Augustus, a point made in the *Dialogus* (37.4–8). Tacitus pondered the changes in the character of the traditional Roman careers, and saw that they entailed a reorientation of *uirtus*, that Roman concept which incorporated a large ideal of excellence and publicly recognized achievement.[15] That in turn brought into question the foundations of enduring fame: how was a man to acquire a reputation with posterity, once the means of achieving it were so circumscribed? The sorts of activities that secured *uirtus* and *gloria* in the days of the free *respublica* were no longer possible under an autocrat, especially if he turned out a bad man. How, he clearly asked himself, was one to be a good senator or general in the reign of a Domitian and leave a name to be remembered for all ages?

Tacitus attempted an answer to this basic question in two of his early monographs, *Dialogus* and *Agricola*; in them he set out to show his sense of the altered conditions of a traditional career. In the former he aimed to demonstrate not so much the decline of forensic oratory (though he makes it clear that he is aware of a sort of decline both in the importance of the cases and in the conditions of trials), as its now restricted scope. In the latter, the treacherous rewards of military success and administrative skill are realized in the life of his father-in-law, Julius Agricola. Before turning to them, a partial account of Tacitus' own public life will set the stage.

14 Defendants on a charge of *maiestas*, like Libo at *A.* 2.39.1 or Piso at *A.* 3.11.2, had considerable difficulty in securing the support of others to speak on their behalf. But any man might plead his own case: cf. Plin. *Epp.* 4.22.2 [Trebonius Rufus] *egit ipse causam non minus feliciter quam diserte*, 6.22.2 *egit uterque pro se*.

15 It is possible that this question had been posed as long ago as the early 40s BC by M. Junius Brutus in his treatise *De uirtute*, which was dedicated to Cicero. Douglas, for instance, follows Hendrickson in speculating that the dialogue *Brutus* is Cicero's reply to the supposed quietism of Brutus' argument (Intro. p. xi), but this has now been questioned. Tacitus at any rate makes clear his view at *Agr.* 1.4: *tam saeua et infesta uirtutibus tempora*.

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2. TACITUS' CAREER

Tacitus was a new man, *nouus homo*. His family had never advanced far in the political life of the city (assuming that any of them had even sought *honores*); his father was presumably equestrian, and may have been an imperial agent, *procurator*,[16] so the son was well placed to move up the social scale if he chose to. He did so choose, and what enabled Tacitus to rise was his eloquence. He was the most celebrated pleader of his day – Pliny refers to his speaking *eloquentissime*, and says that the remarkable quality of his style was its magnificence (*Ep.* 2.11.17).[17] It was that which opened up to him a path to political advancement. But there is a curious fact about his activity as an advocate that suggests a certain disenchantment early on: he never published any of his speeches. That was a common enough practice in his day; Pliny refers frequently to several speeches he is preparing for publication, as usual after elaborate rewriting.[18] Tacitus' refusal to publish could be attributed to any number of motives, but it may here be suggested that what most weighed with him was a sense of the ephemeral quality of contemporary oratorical effort. It simply did not matter how well you spoke in public, the issues were too trivial to justify their preservation in a published speech. Or, worse yet, one's efforts might go for nothing. An instance of such frustration was arguably the trial of Marius Priscus, of which more below.

Of Tacitus' political (as distinct from oratorical) progress he tells us himself in the opening paragraph of the *Histories*. The unspecific

16 The article s.v. in the *OCD* should be consulted for more information on the status and function of the imperial *procuratores*. For a fuller discussion of Tacitus' career see Martin (1981) 26–38 and Anthony R. Birley, 'The life and death of Cornelius Tacitus', *Historia* 49 (2000) 230–47.

17 Pliny used the adverb σεμνῶς, a by then well-established descriptive term for a grand style; see Hermogenes, *Id.* 1.6 (pp. 242–54 Rabe). Pliny also calls Tacitus a *laudator eloquentissimus* at *Ep.* 2.1.6, describing the public funeral of Verginius Rufus, at which Tacitus pronounced the eulogy.

18 For a handy list of them – Pliny mentioned about half a dozen being readied for publication in his letters – see Sherwin-White's n. to *Ep.* 5.8.6. It is worth noting that Quintilian, on the other hand, only ever published one speech (*Inst.* 7.2.24).

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reference there to a steady advance through the *cursus honorum* under three emperors omits notice of election to socially impressive priesthoods.[19] Later still he secured the proconsulate of Asia, the crown of any senatorial career. All in all, Tacitus had every reason to be as complacent as his junior friend, the only slightly less successful Pliny. Now Pliny was happy with everything he got and never repined, though he could complain about the distraction from his literary work that business entailed (*Epp.* 1.9 and 2.8). But Tacitus for his part reflected upon the diverse paths he and his father-in-law had followed and shook his head over their wasted effort. Why was he so disenchanted with contemporary oratory?

Tacitus had made his reputation as an advocate (and presumably for speaking in the Senate too); that had carried him up the *cursus honorum*. But he could not but see that his own success was exactly mirrored in the careers of men like Eprius Marcellus or M. Aquilius Regulus, scoundrels who battened on the unfortunate: they were two of the most infamous of the *delatores*, self-appointed prosecutors, who hauled the men they denounced as Caesar's enemies before the courts.[20] Like the imperial *procuratores* they were a new breed of men, engendered to meet the unprecedented demands of imperial government. Marcellus and Regulus had effectively persuasive skills at their command, and were acknowledged masters of forensic oratory, but unlike Tacitus or Pliny, they used their talent discreditably and yet prospered greatly. On the other hand, Tacitus had come to see that superb oratory in a good cause availed little. It was arguably the trial of Marius Priscus (to which allusion has already been made) that set the seal upon his own disenchantment.[21]

Priscus had been governor of Africa, and in January of 100 was tried for extortion.[22] Pliny assisted Tacitus in the trial, which he describes enthusiastically in one of his letters. They were successful

19 Tacitus may even have been a *quaestor Augusti*; see G. Alföldi in *MDAI*(*R*) 102 (1995) 251 on *CIL* VI 1574 (this reference is owed to Professor R. H. Martin).

20 Tacitus provides a thumbnail sketch of the type at *A.* 1.74.1–2.

21 This was certainly the belief of Syme (1958) 465: 'so little gained for all the expense of time and talent'; cf. pp. 66, 70, 191.

22 For Marius Priscus see *PIR* M 315.

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up to a point, in that they secured Priscus' conviction; the usually buoyant Pliny reckoned it was a triumph, worthy to be remembered for ever (*Ep.* 2.11.1 *rei magnitudine aeternum*), and he seems to have had every intention of publishing his speech for the prosecution (so Sherwin-White on *Ep.* 2.19). But what actually happened to Priscus? Not much; his lenient punishment became a byword and was mockingly referred to by the satirist Juvenal (1.47–8 *damnatus inani | iudicio*, and cf. 8.119–20). If therefore oratorical power was wasted on true criminals and yet successful against the harmless, the morality of its use became questionable (an issue that goes back to Plato's *Gorgias*). Tacitus came thus to reflect upon the application of the skill that had made him the man he was, and he found it either morally compromised or a sham. Oratory was moreover now flashy in style and politically dead. Better to abandon it, and give fresh scope to talent in other forms of *eloquentia*.

Rather than keep his disillusion to himself, however, he expressed it in literary productions, two short works, deliberately (it may be) designed to be complementary to one another, since they each focus on one of the major avenues to *uirtus* and *gloria*. The first, to be considered briefly, is the encomiastic biography of his father-in-law Cn. Iulius Agricola.

3. THE *AGRICOLA*

Agricola, a *uir militaris*, was, like Tacitus' own father, essentially an imperial administrator, a profession newly developed since the days of the free *respublica*, and necessary to the running of an empire. His career had been smooth and respectable, especially his military commands in Britain. But darkness settled over him in the reign of Domitian, who grew jealous of his successes as a general (§39); charges were laid against Agricola (§41), only to be dropped without explanation. He was later obliged to beg for release from a proposed proconsulship. He perceived that under such an emperor prominence was perilous, and he preferred to pass his life in peace and quiet. The moral Tacitus draws is clear (§42): there can be great men under bad rulers; accommodation or compliance, *obsequium*, and self-restraint, *moderatio*, coupled with hard work, were more useful to Rome as now governed than were the posturings of self-immolated martyrs.

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All this was true and realistic, but it points up a gulf now separating the aspirant to traditional honours from his republican predecessors. Tacitus exposed the uselessness in the contemporary world of an old-fashioned realization of *uirtus* in the military sphere. The splendour had gone out of the life of the successful general. He describes the award to Agricola of the insignia of a triumph, the honorific statue, the many distinguished words, but all of this was 'instead of a triumph' (*pro triumpho*, 40.1). By that time triumphs were reserved for members of the imperial family. So we are left with the sense of a job well done for little reward yet at considerable personal risk. And there is the underlying problem of fame. Tacitus was clearly worried that for all Agricola's efforts his reputation might die with him: hence the need for the biography, stressed in the opening paragraph.[23] His sense of the fragility of renown is repeated in the concluding sentence of the work, and Richmond in his commentary rightly drew attention to the fact that but for Tacitus' encomium we should now know very little, and that confused, about his father-in-law.[24] (By writing the biography Tacitus also ensures that he too will be known about, a point he draws attention to with the word *narratus* at 46.4; Boswell had the like motivation in writing of Dr Johnson, to commend himself as well as his theme to posterity.) Tacitus would go on to deal with similar issues in his analysis of the current state of the still distinguished art of public speaking. This is dramatically analysed in the *Dialogus*, but before discussing that work it will be useful to consider in more detail two issues: one, the problem of fame, the other, the first-century debate about the state of contemporary oratory.

4. FAME

Cicero had repeatedly expressed what must have been a commonplace among the élite, that *uirtus* could expect to be attended both in this life and after death by fame (*gloria*); fame might not be so desir-

23 Biography was indeed becoming a popular literary form at this time (see Sherwin-White on Plin. *Ep.* 3.10.1).

24 Of course, Agricola may well have figured in contemporary histories now lost.

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able in itself, but still it shadows *uirtus*.[25] A successful Roman expected renown, but the principate threw this along with so many other traditional concepts into confusion.[26] We have seen how Tacitus was concerned for the reputation of his father-in-law, but the most eloquent contemporary voice raised on this issue is Pliny's, and his anxious wooing of literary fame deserves more careful consideration (and perhaps more sympathy) than it usually receives.[27] He makes no secret of his yearning for what he calls the *praemium aeternitatis* (*Ep.* 9.3.1), and, since he is no *uir militaris*, and the opportunity for doing great deeds lies *in aliena manu* (i.e. that of the Princeps, *Ep.* 3.7.14), he can only hope to achieve lasting renown through his writings. Now Pliny is often felt nowadays to be complacent, but in this regard he displays extreme anxiety, and we can observe him desperately searching for means to secure literary immortality. Mark how he encourages Caninius Rufus to compose something, and Octavius to publish or at least recite his verses (*Epp.* 1.3.4, 2.10), or note his anguish that C. Fannius has died without publishing his monograph on Nero's victims, *pulcherrimum opus* (*Ep.* 5.5.7–8). He is determined to leave something to testify that he had lived (*Ep.* 3.7.14), but what? The publication of deliberative oratory was, as we have already noted from his own witness, out of the question; the themes were too trivial (see n. 12).[28] Of course, his forensic speeches, suitably revised, might do the trick, but here we meet with a complete lack of self-confidence. To be sure, he works away at preparing them for publication (see n. 4), but in that letter about Fannius he expresses his misgivings and terror: *occursant animo mea mortalitas, mea scripta. nec dubito te quoque eadem cogitatione terreri* (*Ep.* 5.5.7). He cannot be sure that his speeches will deserve the notice of posterity, probably even in his heart of hearts knows they do not (*Ep.* 5.8.6 *egi magnas et graues causas.*

25 So *Tusc.* 1.109; for some other representative passages see *Arch.* 28, *Mil.* 97, *Font.* 49 *tum enim uitae socia uirtus, mortis comes gloria fuisset.*

26 We catch a pre-echo of the issue in Cicero's *Brutus*, where he deplores the fact that the young Brutus' chances of securing the rewards of his *uirtus* have been blasted by political developments (§§331–2).

27 Very good so far as it goes on this matter is A.-M. Guillemin, *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps* (Paris 1929) 13–22 'Conception de la gloire'.

28 In point of fact, however, deliberative oratory had never been much published.

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