Verwendungskontexte scheinen weniger zur Lexembedeutung als vielmehr zum Weltwissen zu gehören.


This enterprising book sets itself three main goals, according to the jacket’s blurb: first, it «challenges the notion that Tacitus sought to explain the decline of oratory under the principate»; instead, his Dialogus provides «a sophisticated consideration of eloquentia in the Roman empire». Secondly, Tacitus «challenges Cicero’s position at the top of Rome’s oratorical canon», and thirdly, he «shows that eloquentia is a means by which to compete with the power of the principate». On pp. 14–16 there is a handy summary of the seven chapters and the conclusion.

The Introduction is crucial for an understanding of van den Berg’s (henceforth vdB) methodology for dealing with the issues set out just now. He begins with Aper’s first speech on the utility of oratory (5.5), claiming on p. 2 that whether we agree or disagree with Aper’s statement, we make «the methodological assumption that dialogues are designed mainly to persuade an audience». This presupposition he then sets about undermining: it excludes the tradition of deliberative rhetoric (among other things). To help the reader better grasp his method of dealing with the «complex connection of the local utterance to a larger network of meaning», vdB provides on pp. 3–7 a brief analysis of Virgil, Aeneid 6.456–60. It is regrettable that the crucial word fides in Aen. 6.459 is mistranslated. It doesn’t mean ‘loyalty’ or ‘good faith’, but ‘pledge’ or ‘guarantee’, its standard meaning in oaths, as Ed. Fraenkel illustrated in Thes. ling. Lat. VI, 1.667–38–41. So this particular example of «local utterance» in relation to «the larger network of meaning» proved unhelpful, to me at least. Sometimes meaning is site-specific and cannot be blurred by appeal to a «wider network». Another problem is the emphasis on deliberative oratory, because the context of the speeches delivered in the Dialogus is forensic and adversarial, as vdB’s own helpful outline of the whole work on p. 304–13 makes clear: «5.4 I’ll accuse Maternus». In §4 Maternus says he and Aper frequently engage in contentio, and that Secundus can now act as iudex. So Aper’s speech is not mainly deliberative, as is claimed on p. 7, but largely forensic, and that is one of the reasons readers either agree or disagree with him. Finally, there are some injudicious claims. On p. 8 it is not the case that Aper says Maternus disregards honestum, least of all at 10.5, where all that is said is that in Greece acting was honestum for gentlemen (cf. p. 128, n. 12). There is nowhere in the Dialogus an «ultimate appeal» to honestum. Nor, p. 14 (and then 127, 148), is it fair to charge Maternus as poet with «quietism»; his friends came to see him precisely because they were concerned that his drama was unnecessarily riling important people, and yet he insists that he means to proceed just as he has started. Maternus needs peace and quiet in which to compose, but his works address the issues of the day (think Virgil’s Georgics).
That final point takes us into the first chapter on the «cultural and political milieu that gave rise to the Dialogus» (p. 14). On p. 19 vdB reckons that «the grounds for offense [at Maternus’ Cato] indicate technique rather than content». If that were so Tacitus ought to have written aures rather than animos as object of offendisse at §2.1. To put that another way, could Maternus really have intended to replicate technical blunders in his Thyestes? Since we have been urged to assess «local utterance» within the «wider network of meaning» it is worthwhile to recall A. N. Sherwin-White’s observation on p. 200 of his commentary on Pliny’s Letters (Oxford, 1966) that «society was fussy in the extreme about offensae» (and cf. his index s.v. offensae).

The coda to this chapter also rather misfired. VdB reckons on p. 50 that «it remains one of the great and seemingly inexplicable paradoxes that Aper so powerfully defends the stylistic virtues that Tacitus embraced elsewhere, if at the same time we are meant to believe that Tacitus bemoans the fate of oratory and rejects Aper’s positions along the way». There is really no paradox at all as is recognized in n. 96: Tacitus himself may well have taken the view that modernist style was essentially sound, but wasted on contemporary oratory; its future was better assured when deployed in historiography. To put that another way, style alone couldn’t salvage the content of modern oratory. (On p. 203 vdB admits the banality of senatorial debate, a banality confirmed by Pliny, Nat. Hist. 8.135 on the numerous senatusconsulta relating to monopolies of hedgehog skins.) Granting that Tacitus saw eloquentia as transgeneric (of course he did!) it may well remain the case that some genres, particularly poetry and history, were more viable in the contemporary world than oratory. No one believes that «the Dialogus thoroughly rejects contemporary oratory»; the issue is its reduced importance, not the total repudiation of it. That oratory nonetheless still had a useful place in the real world of contemporary Rome was something that Tacitus and Pliny could readily demonstrate in their own social advancement.

The second chapter, which deals with the tradition of the «argumentative dynamics» (p. 14) of dialogue as a literary genre, continues with laying foundations for analysis. VdB provides a fair-minded account and assessment of the varied interpretations so far available. My hunch is that where he engages with T. J. Luce on pp. 86–8 he sets out his own preferred way of reading the six set speeches embedded in the work. I must however confess that despite repeated attempts I don’t grasp the point he is trying to make. The issue is the failure of Messalla’s attack on contemporary education to satisfy, given the rhetorical accomplishment of all the speakers in the work. As Luce said the «reader as critic» must be «able to size up the underlying strengths and weaknesses of a case». Just so: in the economy of the Dialogus Messalla’s argument that contemporary education is the cause of the decline which he for one recognizes must fail to satisfy entirely (even if some of the points he makes have traction). If his argument wholly sufficed there’d be no need for Maternus to offer his own view of the chief cause of decline. So the reader-as-critic’s dissatisfaction has to be engendered by the writer. There can be no inadvertence (cf. p. 87).

At last with the third chapter vdB addresses himself to a problematic passage, which the reader who knows the work (and such a one is the target audience, see p. ix) has long been waiting for, namely the opening paragraph of the work. VdB
is well aware that the first sentence of the *Dialogus* offers a clear view, ascribed to the dedicatee Fabius Justus, that contemporary oratory is inferior to that of the (not clearly defined) past. His problem begins with what follows the indirect question, the part of the sentence beginning *neque enim*. The account of this expression on pp. 102–3 is not cogent, since the word *enim* either explains or confirms. In their ‘Lexicon Taciteum’ Gerber-Greef take *enim* here to be explanatory (p. 346b towards the bottom of the column). So Tacitus as it were ‘unpacks’ the indirect question he has put into Fabius’ mouth with an explanation of how ‘we’ express our sense of decline by repudiating the very word *orator*. VdB wants to open out the debates in the work so that the reader will be left at the end with no strong sense of agreement on the issue of decline. So he has to defang the opening paragraph, in which Tacitus has, so far as most readers are concerned, confined the issue to the reasons for an acknowledged decline. To put that another way, if Tacitus had wanted an open-ended discussion the question Fabius asked would have run thus: ‘Do you agree with those of us who reckon contemporary oratory is inferior to that of the past?’ Tacitus could then have said, ‘Well, I take your point, but this is a difficult matter, which, as it happens, I heard discussed when I was just embarking on my own oratorical career, so rather than give you my own view, let me recall for you what I heard on the following occasion’. But Tacitus didn’t want an open-ended debate, so though Aper is allowed to defend contemporary oratory, his friends insist he doesn’t really believe what he says (Tacitus described him as a dissimulator at §2.2), and they go on to provide their own accounts of the causes of decline. There is a further point to be made on this score. 

VdB passes over in silence the writer’s own qualification of the oratorical attainments of the dialogue’s interlocutors. Tacitus described them as *disertissimi*, §1.2, rather than *eloquentissimi*, and then added *ut nostris temporibus*, which VdB duly translates ‘taking our times into account’, but without comment on its significance, or any notice taken of its virtual reprise by Maternus at 41.5 in *quantum opus est disertissimi* (a passage cited and translated on p. 118 again without comment; so too on pp. 277 n. 88, 290, and 295). These two similar qualifications not only hint to the reader that Tacitus’ own sympathies lie with Maternus, but the earlier of them serves as an endorsement of the premise underlying Fabius’ reported question: oratory has indeed declined, but it suffices for contemporary purposes.

On balance then it is the argument of the third chapter which is crucial for the cogency of VdB’s primary thesis that Tacitus did not seek to explain the decline of oratory under the principate. As for his secondary proposition, addressed in the fourth and fifth chapters, that the *Dialogus* provides instead «a sophisticated consideration of *eloquentia* in the Roman empire», I don’t suppose anyone would venture to challenge it.

The sixth chapter «contributes to our understanding of Latin prose intertextuality and of the extent to which later authors could reformulate the tensions of the Ciceronian tradition in the service of their own literary creations» (p. 15). VdB is right to observe on p. 237 Aper’s sense of the importance of time and of developments in oratory over time; it wasn’t something Cicero had attended to much in his accounts of the progress of oratory. Aper is in effect thinking histor-
ically, which is of course exactly the framework which Maternus will bring to an understanding of the issue of decline.

The final chapter makes large and justifiable claims for the *Dialogus* as innovatory in the sphere of literary criticism. Whatever it owes to the earlier models, on which the different speakers draw, it is in itself more «capacious and self-reflexive» (p.16) than any of them, and thus invites readers to «infer the consequences of different critical habits». This is entirely fair, but vdB tends to underplay the historical (and political) angle adumbrated in the opening paragraph, which is glanced at by Aper, and more openly enunciated by Maternus. He questions on p. 244 with n. 7 the view that in the *Dialogus prior* denotes the late Republic specifically (but on p. 281 this sense is accepted); Gudeman or Gerber-Greef s.vv. *prior*, *primus* rather than Mayer should be consulted on this point of Tacitean usage. Tacitus indeed shies away from the bite-sized periodization of earlier models in opening up an abyss between the outspoken Republic and the necessary discretion of the principate. What Maternus says at §27.3 on the loss of our ‘old-fashioned freedom of speech’ is surely here relevant (the passage is finally discussed on pp. 300–3). There lies the real originality of the critique of the principate’s effect on literature generally.

The Conclusion on pp. 297–8 urges us not to «fall prey» to Maternus’ argument about the diminished status of contemporary oratory. Yet once again vdB has done less than justice to what Maternus said about the «degeneration» of freedom of speech, a degeneration which Tacitus in his role as historian located at the establishment of the principate (*Hist.* 1.1.1). Historiography too suffered under autocracy. So in answer to vdB’s claim that «the possibility remains open that great talents will find a place under the new conditions» it can be said that of course they will, but it won’t be as distinguished a place in the days of the old Republic when one could speak one’s mind. We must take into account the consistency of Tacitus’ stated view of the impact of autocracy on literary production generally: oratory, history and biography all suffered from a number of defects, such as flattery, or score-settling or, at bottom, an inability to speak truth to power. To cast the net yet further, Pliny too saw autocracy as a brake on literary talent. He seems to have published some of his speeches under Domitian, but he only started editing his letters after that emperor’s assassination, and in the very first he hails the renaissance of literature once the tyrant had been disposed of. VdB ignores the widespread sense of constraint felt by would-be authors living through a reign of terror. Even after terror evaporated, however, Juvenal could still not exercise the freedom of speech of a Lucilius; indeed, Horace had already declawed satire. Society during the principate was markedly different from what it had been in the late Republic, and vdB’s attempt to neutralize the effect of autocracy on oratory doesn’t convince.

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