

Authorize and Repeat; Authorize and Repetition: *Dialogus* and Difference

In the wake of the growing sophistication of studies of late Republican and Augustan literature in the 90's, Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus* has elicited increasingly subtle and complex interpretations (Goldberg 1999, Gowing 2005: 102-131, Gallia 2009, e.g.). In this paper, focusing on a single formal aspect of the work – allusion as repetition and difference at *Dialogus* 18.3-6 – I build on recent interpretations to determine the way in which Tacitus' *Dialogus* makes political points using *formal* devices rather than statements of “substance” or content and, in so doing, problematizes the political, moral, and literary authority of its speakers and potentially its author, Tacitus himself. While it is possible to view this reflexive de-authorization as politically, morally or literarily subversive – or, for that matter, politically, morally and literarily vacuous – it is also possible to interpret the increased operation of formal device over explicit political statement, neither as a negation nor a diminution of political significance and social engagement in the shift from substance to style, but rather as a reconfiguration and intensification of a newly performed kind of authority.

The formal device that I consider is the paradox built into the controversy about rhetorical styles at Tacitus, *Dialogus* 18.3-6. At *Brutus* 287, Cicero questioned the ability of contemporary orators to avow Atticism (Narducci 1997: 114-133), asking, “How can they [imitate the ‘Attics’] when the ‘Attics’ differed so much from one another?” Tacitus' speaker Aper similarly asks how contemporary orators can avow allegiance to the style of the “ancients” (viz. Cicero and his contemporaries) when those ancients differed so much from one another.

Aper's move is significant for two reasons: first, it marks the *mise-en-abyme* effect of a repetition with a difference of a repetition with a difference (fascinating or tedious depending on one's critical orientation); second, Aper's remark constitutes a disavowal of authority – the authority of style – by a covert citation of an authority – precisely the authority that is being explicitly disavowed by the “modernist” Aper, namely the “classic” Cicero. Far from being merely a deconstructionist game, however, Aper's repetition as repetition, disavowal as avowal, is authoritative by virtue of the Ciceronianism of its style, even if its substance – disavowal of Cicero and the “Classics” – is as it were anti-authoritarian or anti-Ciceronian. Recent work (esp. Fox 2007: 152-155, 162-163; cf. Connolly 2007: 239-245) suggests that the author's capacity to guarantee his or her work (i.e. *auctoritas*) is, even in some of its most seminal, influential first instantiations – those of Cicero himself – already fluid and “ironic”, interrogative and re-performed. If this is true, regardless of what any of the characters in the *Dialogus* are saying, regardless of what Tacitus in this most Ciceronian work (Mayer 2001: 27-31) is actually saying, authority is a matter of style, a matter of what one *does* rather than what one *says*. If this is the case, and if action and engagement – doing as much as saying – are the essence of the political (Arendt 1959: 13-18, e.g.), far from being apolitical as it is sometimes thought to be – as Maternus, the main speaker of the dialogue himself presents it (40.1-41.4) – the state of eloquence in Tacitus' *Dialogus* is political in ways traditional *and* revolutionary.

Works Cited

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