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Chapter

9 - Latin Criticism of the Early Empire pp. 274-296

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LATIN CRITICISM OF THE EARLY EMPIRE

The name 'Silver Latin' is often given to the literature of the first century of the Christian era and is generally understood to imply its inferiority to the Golden Age of the late Republic and Augustan era. Analogy with the five Hesiodic ages, in which the silver age was both later and less worthy than the golden, suggests the cliché of decline. To what extent did the Romans of the early imperial period feel that they and their contemporaries were a falling away from the previous generation? We will see that the change in form of government, by denying opportunities for significant political speech, trivialised the art of oratory. But was there any such external constraint on poetry?

Modern critics have reproached Silver Latin epic and tragedy with being 'rhetorical'. Certainly it is clear from Tacitus' *Dialogus* that men thwarted from political expression transferred to the safer vehicle of historical or mythical poetry both the techniques and ideals of public oratory. But just as no one suggests that Juvenal's satires were poorer compositions because of his apparent rhetorical skill, so rhetorical colouring in the higher poetic genres of tragedy and epic is not necessarily a fault. We would judge the individual composition primarily by its internal coherence: but Roman critics like Quintilian measured a work by its conformity to the characteristics of its genre and defined those characteristics by a canon, which by his time consisted largely of late-Republican and Augustan writers. Thus for classicising critics of the first century 'different' meant worse, while the creative artists who achieved significant poetry or prose did so largely in reaction against a norm they could not usefully imitate.

Augustus himself was to some extent responsible for the hiatus between the celebratory history and poetry of his early years and the renewal of creative writing under Nero.¹ His old age made him intolerant not only of criticism and independent judgements in history and oratory, but also of the last great poet, Ovid, and his ironical indifference to official morality. The year of

¹ On the literary output and taste of the forty years between the death of Augustus and Nero's assumption of power see Roland Mayer, 'Neronian Classicism', *AJP*, 103 (1982), 305–18.

Tiberius' adoption as successor, AD 4, has been marked as a turning point for society and for literature, on the evidence of increased suppression of free expression.²

1 Velleius Paterculus and Seneca the Elder

Two figures speak for the Romans of the immediate post-Augustan period, reflecting on the burst of achievement they had outlived. Neither of them, unfortunately, is an independent thinker or commands the critical terminology to analyse the standards by which past orators, poets, and historians are praised or found wanting, but each illustrates characteristic shifts of literary interest in the new generation.

First, the soldier-historian Velleius Paterculus, whose *Roman History* combines a swift compendium of events down to Rome's destruction of Carthage and Corinth in 146 BC with a progressively more detailed narrative culminating in the career of his patron, the emperor Tiberius (reigned AD 14–37). Roman historical writing, still undeveloped at Cicero's death, had flowered with the idiosyncratic monographs and *Histories* (now largely lost) of Sallust, composed before the Augustan principate, and the full-length national history of Titus Livius of Patavium (59 BC–AD 17), the first surviving Roman historian to compose his narrative as a literary synthesis of earlier sources, applying the arts of rhetoric as Cicero would have wished. These two contrasted stylists set the pattern for subsequent historians, but whereas Sallust remains an object of fascination to Roman literary critics and a school book even into the Middle Ages, it was Livy who initially provided the model for rhetorical history. Velleius takes over the form without the guiding convictions, and if he had not been the only Latin source for the rise of Tiberius, he would probably not have survived on his literary or historical merits.

When he comes to write on cultural history, however, he is clearly adapting the ideas of more sophisticated intellects than his own. Twice he offers an excursus on this theme, the first time after the fall of Corinth marking the onset of Roman hegemony at the end of his first book (1.16–18). Surveying the rise and fall of different arts, he concludes that great talents tend to concentrate in one art at a given time, emerging within a generation like the three Greek tragedians or the three greatest talents of Old Comedy or their counterparts in New Comedy. Philosophy and oratory resist his attempts to match this pattern, since he has to admit excellence in oratory from the rise of the long-lived Isocrates through the generation of his pupils to the time of their successors. He offers counterparts of his own from Roman literary history, with an acme for Roman tragedy around the lifetime of Accius (end

² Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 369, and in more detail, *History in Ovid* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 198 and 212–14.

of the second century BC) and for comedy around Caecilius and Afranius (spanning the second century); to history he assigns a period of eighty years culminating in Livy, and to oratory a flowering that includes with its central figure, Cicero, some speakers of the older generation and the group of younger orators who had learned by hearing him.

The inconsistencies of Velleius' Roman examples reflect not only his own prejudice against the early dramatists Ennius and Plautus, but also the difficulty of adapting the ideas of a fourth- or third-century Athenian source which had put forward the dramatic genres native to Athens, ignoring epic, didactic, and lyric poetry, which flourished over a wider period and the whole area of the Aegean. Cicero reflects a similar Isocratean emphasis in his more discriminating survey of rhetoric in the *Brutus*, but although Velleius seems to have drawn on the *Brutus* for the earlier Roman orators whom he explicitly excludes (1.17.3) from the period of acme, he is using his historical framework to argue a different point.

Velleius experiences difficulties both with the one-generation theory and in using the competitive aspect of imitation (*aemulatio*) to explain the transference of artistic interest from one genre to another.³ Cicero had claimed that *aemulatio* fostered the arts, but he had not had to explain its relation to decline. Velleius instead argues that the perfection of classic artists in any art or genre deterred successors who therefore diverted their talents: he does not notice that this in turn contradicts the Atheno-centric claim that talent languished away from the competitive atmosphere provided by the city. There is here a real confusion between the agonistic rivalry of the Greek theatre and courtroom and a theory of imitation in which each generation advanced beyond its models in the process of learning its art from them. And it has not generally been noticed that while Velleius' statements imply the decline of Roman oratory in his own time, he does not acknowledge decline, but writes only in the most general terms, returning from his comment on the Roman orators to the *grammatici*, sculptors, painters, and modellers of his Greek source.

Indeed, far from being concerned with contemporary decline, he offers in his second excursus on the arts (2.36) a positive picture of subsequent achievement. Since the significant year of Augustus' birth (63 BC), he declares, Rome has produced the orators Pollio and Messalla Corvinus, Sallust – 'the rival of Thucydides' – Varro of Atax (translator of Apollonius' *Argonautica*), Catullus, singled out for special praise, Lucretius, Virgil – 'the prince of poets' – Rabirius, Livy, Tibullus, and Ovid, each credited with perfection in his own literary form. There are traces here of a 'neoteric' canon, but Velleius' own modifications, notably the omission of Horace and Propertius, reveal the same poor judgement that can include Rabirius' lost

³ Heldmann, *Entwicklung und Verfall*, pp. 32–59.

epic alongside the *Aeneid*. The epitomator has left us little evidence of his sources' critical approach.

Seneca the Elder, born thirty years before Velleius, published his reminiscences of the Augustan declamatory schools at about the same time (AD 30–40). Although the great declaimers of his youth are the focus of his memoirs, he allows his readers to glimpse the reputations of Virgil and Ovid in formation, and in the preface to the *Controversiae* offers his own account of the decline of public eloquence. The world he considers includes only the lawcourts and the schools: he realises that the fictional cases and historical deliberative *suasoriae* of the schools are a new form of training, not practised in the Republic, and recognises the discrepancy between the virtuosity of public declamation and real contests of the courtroom. The auditorium was the centre of rhetorical interest in his youth, in which young Ovid declaimed, parents and teachers were obsessed with the displays, and Augustus and Agrippa came to hear the most famous performers, such as the rhetoricians Porcius Latro, Arellius Fuscus, Haterius, and Cestius, impersonate the defendant or accuser in imaginary cases, exploiting the paradoxes of adultery, incest, murder, and disinheritance. It was probably the popularity of these displays that led Asinius Pollio to innovate by reading his historical writings in public recitation (*Contr.* 4.pr.2). The Ciceronian age of reading and reflection was being replaced by an oral culture, with the inevitable corollary of a greater attention to clever epigram than to extended argument in composition.

Seneca's preface to Book I is much quoted as evidence for recognition of the decline of Roman oratory, but its style is surely fresher than its content. Its starting point is the superiority of these voices from the past as models for Seneca's own sons to imitate and the usefulness of their diversity; it is, he argues, always dangerous to base one's style upon a single model and more dangerous now than ever since Roman oratory has been in continual decline since the death of Cicero. In the moralist tradition, he blames the change of style for the worse on idleness and effeminacy in the young, invoking the same aspects of youthful fashion that his own hero Cato had denounced two hundred years before. To condemn effeminacy of style without specifying defects of vocabulary, rhythm, or sentence structure tells us little, and Seneca's son will offer a better demonstration when (*Ep.* 114) he compares Maecenas' luxurious life with his stylistic decadence and bad taste, illustrated from his prose and verse.

Although declamation has some interest for modern students of literary theory as a type of fiction,⁴ Seneca's material has chiefly enjoyed the attention of historians of style, for he cites striking aphorisms and turns of phrase rather than techniques of argument or arrangement. In this respect the

⁴ Trimpi, *Muses of One Mind*, pp. 306–27.

instruction in method offered by the *Minor Declamations* attributed to Quintilian gives a clearer picture of the training offered by the *Controversiae*. Yet Seneca's excerpts show that the pointed style which we associate with the Neronian age was already developed almost a hundred years before; short statements in basic prose vocabulary are made, by their very brevity or boldness of phrasing, to carry a load of irony or innuendo.

These memoirs, however, also show Seneca's appreciation of contemporary poetry and offer portraits of individual speakers that carry beyond Cicero's *Brutus* the art of descriptive criticism in which Dionysius of Halicarnassus excelled: Virgil is already a classic, beyond criticism to all but the perverse, and praised for his restraint in two similar physical hyperboles of the *Aeneid*; where Homer had depicted the Cyclops hurling a huge rock ('mountain is torn from mountain', *Od.* 9.481–2), Virgil is content with 'no small part of a mountain' (*Aen.* 10.128), and when he is conveying the scale of Antony's massive warships at Actium he softens his image: 'you might suppose there floated the Cyclades upturned' (*Aen.* 8.691–2) (*Suas.* 1.12). Comparison between Virgil and Homer was made from the beginning, and in this case, ironically, Seneca seems to depend on Maecenas, who had praised Virgil for achieving grandeur without falling into decadence. Again, Seneca reports a discussion with Julius Montanus and Ovid on Virgil's adaptation from Varro of Atax in *Aeneid* 8.26–7: 'it was night, and over all the earth tired creatures, birds and beasts, were held in deep sleep'. Ovid's reaction was characteristic of the new pointed brevity: how much better it would have been if the last part of the second line were cut out and it finished thus: 'Everything was of night' (7.1.27–8).⁵ Seneca provides a shrewd assessment of Ovid's gifts (2.2.8–12): his avoidance of the *controversia* in favour of the dramatic *suasoria*, because of a distaste for argument; his indifference to order in presenting commonplaces; his declamations with the qualities of poetry cast into prose (*carmen solutum*) and his restraint of vocabulary in oratory. With this Seneca contrasts the self-indulgence that made Ovid wilfully cherish in verse precisely his most extravagant conceits, and his inability to leave well alone. He shows us too the poet incorporating a Virgilian allusion, 'not as a literary theft but as an open borrowing to be recognised' (*Suas.* 3.7). It is with the canonical status of Virgil that allusion becomes a dominant ornament in Latin poetry, as poets either extend or redirect his poetic form. Seneca, though recognising Ovid's faults, can call his talent 'well groomed, becoming, and charming' (*Contr.* 2.2.8). How fine a boundary there is between approved elegance and the deplored effeminacy of the young!

These judgements are necessarily disjointed but suggest some of the critical issues of the day. To show Seneca's own critical repertoire and power of verbal characterisation we should look at his portraits of the great declaimers.

⁵ Tr. by Winterbottom, *Seneca*, II, p. 49.

Arellius Fuscus embodies at the same time the confusion between the virtues of poetry and oratory that will increase in the literature of the first century, and qualities which have been recognised as Roman Asianism.⁶

Arellius Fuscus' developments [*explicatio*] were brilliant, but elaborate and involved, his ornament too contrived, his word arrangement more effeminate than could be tolerated by a mind in training for such chaste and rigorous precepts. His oratory was highly uneven, sometimes bare, sometimes because of its over-freedom wandering and discursive. Proems, arguments and narrations he spoke dryly, while in descriptions words were always granted a licence that went beyond the rules – the only requirement was that they should shine. There was nothing sharp, hard, or rugged. The style was brilliant, wanton rather than luxuriant. (*Contr.* 2, pr. 1)⁷

Without endorsing Seneca's diagnosis of stylistic corruption, we can detect in this cult of form both the concentration on the isolated sentence unit, which would undermine the organisation of prose works in the next generation, and the new goals of polish and smoothness (*cultus, nitor*), charming in verse but inimical to agonistic prose. It is as though epideictic form displaces that of fighting oratory when performance becomes theatre and the spectators of recitation and declamation replace the senate or political assembly.

2 Seneca the Younger and Petronius

It is not clear how far we should credit the elder Seneca for the literary achievements of his most famous son; the younger Seneca's oratory was submerged in his service as ghost-writer to Nero, but in almost every other literary genre he was a brilliant innovator: as satirist, essayist, and epistolographer, while in tragic poetry he dominated the new flowering of the Neronian age. It has been common to speak of a Neronian literary revolution, but despite the affinities between the work of Seneca and his nephew Lucan, no single literary fashion unites their work with that of the Stoic satirist Persius or the picaresque novel of Petronius.

The younger Seneca's philosophical principles did not interfere with his respect for poetry; passages from the early *De vita* (2.2.5–6) and the letters (108.10) show that he followed Aristotle rather than Plato in distinguishing the vicarious emotions of dramatic spectators from the damaging personal emotions to be avoided by Stoics, and he shared Cleanthes' recommendation of verse as a more vivid and memorable vehicle for moral instruction. Contemptuous of Ennius (as we know from Aulus Gellius cited below) he was respectful of Virgil and Ovid but resorted to them chiefly for moral texts rather than aesthetic or rhetorical analysis. Letter 88 illustrates the many forms of contemporary Virgilian criticism and explication, but the grammarians,

⁶ Fairweather, *Seneca the Elder*, pp. 243–303.

⁷ Winterbottom, *Seneca*, I, pp. 197–8.

like the moralists, tended to focus on the single line rather than the larger scale aspects of the epic. A typical letter (79) shows his approach as a prescriptive critic. His correspondent Lucilius had shown an interest in composing topographical poetry about Sicily. Surely, Seneca urges him, Lucilius will not hesitate to tackle the description of Mount Aetna, since his predecessors' achievements (Seneca has Virgil and Ovid in mind, perhaps also the unidentified author of the *Aetna*) have not pre-empted the theme but simply expanded its scope: 'The last man to write has the best circumstances: he finds the words ready to hand and they will take on a new look once rearranged' (79.5). He sees this as a challenge, arguing that the best can always be matched if it cannot be outdone. In another letter (84) Seneca considers the imitation of poetic models and develops Horace's Pindaric simile of the poet as a bee collecting pollen from many flowers. We ought, he claims, to read as the bees gather,⁸ organising our material separately before amalgamating it into one single concentrated flavour; only food that is digested can truly be assimilated into the bloodstream, and intellectual food swallowed whole will merely be fodder for the memory, not nourishment for the intellect. Again, he sees the proper relationship between literary model and emulator as that between father and son, not the barren similarity of an inanimate portrait to the living face.

Despite his own pungent style of almost nagging questions, commands, and didactic analogies, Seneca inherited his father's mistrust of self-indulgent, effeminate diction, and his most famous letter (114) turns to the causes of bad taste in style, examining the fashion for different excesses such as hyperbole, cryptic brevity, or extravagance in metaphor. Here it is that the extravagant vocabulary, phrasing, and rhythms of Maecenas are held up as a dreadful warning that a man's style will reflect his way of life. The letter runs over the affectations of preceding generations: Sallustian brevity and archaism; roughness of composition and exaggerated hyperbaton to create suspense; or its opposite, a composition too smooth and sweet, closer to song than speech; or again aphorisms (*sententiae*), too disjointed, far-fetched, or flowery, with more sound than meaning. Behind the overt example of Maecenas it is easy to see the indulgences of Nero, who could not be criticised in person for his life or his art, but the supreme irony of this shrewd and amusing letter is Seneca's account of the trend-setter and his motivation: 'Once the mind has grown accustomed to despising the normal and feeling that the usual is stale, it looks for novelty in speech too ... Faults like these are introduced by some individual who at a particular time dominates eloquence; others imitate them, and pass them on to one another' (114.10, 114.17). Just so a generation later Quintilian would lament the pernicious influence of Seneca himself upon the younger generation:

⁸ Cf. Horace, *Odes* 4.2.27–32: 'I, like a bee ...'; and note Seneca's word play on *legere*, both 'gather' and 'read'.

His admirers loved Seneca rather than imitated him: they fell as far short of him as he of the ancients ... He was popular for his faults alone. Everyone set himself to reproducing what he was capable of reproducing, and in boasting that they were speaking in the Senecan style his admirers slandered Seneca ... As far as his style goes, there is much that is corrupt and particularly dangerous just because the constant faults are so attractive. You might wish him to have written employing his own genius but someone else's judgement. (Quint. 10.1.126–7, 10.1.130)⁹

Quintilian was a Ciceronian, and his strictures on Seneca had some effect on standards in Latin prose in the next generation, and in the fifteenth century, but the anti-Ciceronians of the sixteenth century were again to be attracted to the model of Seneca.

Petronius, it has been suggested,¹⁰ parodied Seneca's prose style in the moralising of his reach-me-down sage Eumolpus. Otherwise, it is not clear that the various pastiches in the *Satyricon* are parodies of specific authors, since Petronius has assigned his literary comments and compositions to absurd characters. Denunciations of the schools of declamation for their hollow themes, and of the bad upbringing of the idle and effeminate young by the pedantic rhetorician Agamemnon in the opening pages of the *Satyricon* come close to parodying Seneca the Elder, but the theme was still taken seriously by Quintilian or the conservative Messalla in Tacitus' *Dialogus* a generation after Petronius' death.¹¹ Indeed, some of Agamemnon's complaints, such as the 'recent' importation of corrupt style from Asia, could have been made by Dionysius or by Cicero's Attic opponents in the Republic.

The two extensive verse excerpts composed by Eumolpus are of a different order. The iambic trimeters narrating in dramatic verse the Virgilian theme of Laocoön and the Trojan horse (*Satyricon* 89) have been treated as parody of Senecan tragedy, but they have only generic features in common with Seneca. Pomponius, for example, also wrote a Trojan tragedy and these lines could as well be parody of Pomponius as of Seneca. The so-called *Bellum civile* (*Satyricon* 119–24) is a more complex problem still. Given its title, it is natural to assume that the work is related to Lucan's great epic of the Civil War. But there are both chronological and literary problems in this assumption. It is generally believed that Lucan had published only three books before his death in the same year as Petronius (AD 65) and that Petronius may have had very little time in which to know the work. There seems to be direct reaction to Lucan in Eumolpus' prefatory comment on his poetic effusion, which stresses the need for inspiration and reaffirms the Virgilian practice of including divine intervention in epic; as far as we know, Lucan was the first poet to abandon this element. But there were civil war poems by Cornelius Severus and Rabirius before Lucan's work, and many of the alleged echoes of Lucan owe

⁹ Cf. what Anthony Trollope has to say about Dickens and his imitators, *Autobiography*, ch. 14.
¹⁰ Sullivan, 'Literary feud', pp. 435–67.

¹¹ George Kennedy, 'Encolpius and Agamemnon in Petronius', *AJP*, 99 (1978), 171–8.

much to Virgil and cannot really be labelled more specifically than to call them post-Virgilian. The Petronian poem itself is overblown but not incompetent, apart from its excess of divine and daemonic figures – precisely the respect in which it differs from Lucan. Surely then Petronius is not attacking Lucan, but showing instead the limitations of those critics who would advocate a Virgilian epic with supernatural trappings in the current style. We should acknowledge that Latin satirists wrote burlesque rather than subtle parody; the author of the *Catalepton* burlesques Ventidius rather than Catullus' 'Phaselus' by applying the form of the latter poem to an incongruous and vulgar subject; Seneca by including a variation on his lament from the *Hercules Furens* in the sardonic lament for Claudius, the *Apocolocyntosis*, does not parody his own tragedy, but burlesques the dead emperor. What underlies Petronius' poetic exercises is rather the rejection of conservative dullness, a gesture that puts him on the same side as the innovators in the Neronian literary renaissance.

3 Tacitus' *Dialogus*'

Perhaps the single most impressive source of both literary history and literary criticism in the first century is the *Dialogue on the Orators* of the historian Tacitus. This subtle work exploits the form of the Ciceronian dialogue to recall or imagine a discussion at the home of the dramatic poet Curiatius Maternus from the early years of Vespasian, the time of Tacitus' youth. While scholars are now agreed that the dialogue was written more than twenty years after its dramatic date, there is still dispute about its date in relation to Tacitus' other minor works, the *Germania* and *Agricola*, and more importantly in relation to Quintilian's *Institutio* and Pliny's *Panegyricus*, which includes praise of contemporary eloquence in a speech of thanks offered to Trajan early in AD 100. The tragedian Maternus was probably the 'sophist' executed by Domitian, and the *Dialogus* was probably written after Quintilian's *Institutio*, but before the speech of Tacitus' friend Pliny, which it would otherwise contradict most discourteously.¹² Because the *Dialogus* is a radical work, which remained outside the mainstream of Roman criticism, and because it claims to describe conditions in the AD 70s, we should discuss it before considering Quintilian, whose work, completed about AD 92, is reflected in the later writers and critics of Rome.

The setting of the dialogue is pointed. Maternus has just given a public reading of his Roman tragedy when he is visited by two leading orators, Marcus Aper and Julius Secundus; later they are joined by the traditionalist Vipstanus Messalla, just as the speakers of Cicero's *De oratore* are joined in

¹² T. D. Barnes, 'The significance of Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*', *HSCP*, 90 (1986), 225–44; and 'Curiatius Maternus', *Hermes*, 109 (1981), 382–4.

the second book by Catulus and his halfbrother. There is perhaps a deliberate contrast with *De oratore* in the plural 'On the Orators' of Tacitus' title, as the relativistic recognition of the many varieties of orator in Tacitus' day contrasts with Cicero's theme of the single, ideal, orator. Certainly the challenge is issued in the opening sentence: 'Why does our age in particular lack any distinction in eloquence, so that it has almost lost the name of Orator?' But in the first third of the text, before the entry of Messalla (14), the topic is rather the rivalry between oratory and poetry as professions for the man of words, with Maternus defending his choice of poetry despite his success as an orator. Since Maternus' poetry is avowedly political, even controversial, his defence of poetry, which rests on the innocent detachment from public life of a Virgil, must be measured by his own choice of material. Secondly Aper, in keeping with his own *arriviste* personality, praises oratory not for its defence of justice or liberty, but for the power, influence, and wealth it brings the speaker. Nothing is said in the first half of the work about deliberative political oratory, but the topics and audiences cited are those of the judicial pleader: senate, popular assembly, and courts have been replaced by courts and judicial hearings before the senate and emperor. Again, Aper's exemplars of modern success are the notorious 'informers', men of ignoble birth, limited resources, and undistinguished morals who have risen to the highest office and dominate society through the benefits they alone can confer upon the emperor. His description itself indicts the abuse of his art. In this socio-political context there is no scope for genuine political eloquence. Maternus simultaneously claims the innocence and divine origin of poetry, citing the achievements of Virgil, Ovid, and Varius in the Augustan age, and boasts of the political impact of his own tragedy, which broke the power of a vicious favourite of Nero. Aper charges Maternus with risking the hostility of the emperor; Maternus replies that Virgil enjoyed imperial favour *and* popular fame.

This prelude contributes little to the main issue besides setting the scene. But the arrival of Messalla, eager to champion the Old School – the orators of Cicero's day – against the new speakers triggers a powerful fighting defence by Aper (16–23). Political undertones continue: why, for instance, in proving how recent the *antiqui* really are, does he pointedly identify the year of Cicero's death with the beginning of Augustus' fifty years in authority? Aper's main assertion is that both forms and style of speaking naturally change with the times: he belittles the audiences of the previous century for their naivety in being impressed by the arid legal schematism of Hermagoras' system, by diffuse commonplaces, and by amateur philosophy. In contrast the sophisticated modern audience is impatient and expects to be entertained, whether they are passers-by, students, or busy autocrats who themselves determine the law and impose time limits on a defence. These listeners expect *cultus*, a smartness that pleases the ear with aphorisms and poetic trappings borrowed from Horace, Virgil, and Lucan. Much of Aper's argument seems to echo

Horace's recommendations in his pleas to Augustus (2.1) for the new poets against the *veteres*, and his demand for beauty and charm in dramatic and epic poetry. But the refinement and sublimity recognised as ideals for poetry in Horace¹³ are less appropriate to judicial or deliberative discourse, and we can see, through the enthusiasm of Aper, why the old-fashioned critic saw these features as corrupt and unmanly. Again, some of Aper's arguments echo Cicero in *Brutus*; as Cicero demonstrated the diversity of the many fine Athenian orators, all entitled to the name of Attic, so Aper stresses the variety of the republican Roman orators; in his own eyes Aper is like Cicero, an innovator unjustly attacked and superior to his critics, for Cicero too, he claims (22), applied *cultus* to his speech and introduced telling aphorisms, at least in his latest speeches after he had found 'the best style of speaking'. The devil is quoting the scriptures of rhetorical orthodoxy to Messalla the believer.

What Aper rejects in earlier oratory, as in poetry and historical writing, is anything longwinded or lacking impact (*tardus, iners*) and above all the cult of archaisms from the first century of Roman literature. What he praises in his interlocutors is the refinement of their language, their invention, arrangement, and command of expanded or contracted form, their sentence structure, vivid aphorisms, and emotional effects, and especially their 'controlled candour', or as we would say, self-censorship.

The first brief section of Messalla's reply (25–6) contradicts Aper: the *antiqui*, however diverse in idiom, shared common standards and models. Earlier Messalla had denounced the Asianic traits of contemporary Greek speakers; now he selects as bad examples at Rome the effeminacy of Maecenas and the incantations of Gallio. In his judgement, present-day orators have the wantonness, frivolity, and licence of actors. This is a turning point. Maternus now dismisses the original question of whether the old orators were superior; the issue is only why this is so. Taking up Aper's phrase 'controlled candour' he politicises the discussion. We have, he declares, lost the ancients' freedom of speech even more than we have lost their eloquence (27.3). The remainder of the dialogue is divided between Messalla, with his theme of educational conservatism, and Maternus, who carries the political argument. Thus Messalla first (28–32) calls for a moral upbringing of the young, and revives the Ciceronian ideal of a broadly based education, rejecting the declamatory schools as training for real life, then in his last speech (33.4–35), under the traditional rubric of *exercitatio* (training) regrets the loss of the old republican practice of putting young men under the guidance of elder statesmen to see public life and observe the handling of political and judicial audiences. Messalla's reference to assemblies (34.2) is the first reminder of specifically deliberative oratory, and although the end of his speech and

¹³ *Ep.* 2.1.165–6: *natura sublimis et acer*. This, the first use of *sublimis* in a context of literary criticism, applies to ethics rather than style but suggests the transference of Greek *hypsos* into Latin. The new ideal may have come from Caecilius, see below, ch. 10, section 3.

beginning of Maternus' reply are lost in our manuscripts, his argument is clearly leading back to Maternus' theme. Maternus has the ironic concluding speech, which acknowledges that by an unfortunate paradox oratory thrives on civil conflict, so that the disturbances of the last years of the Republic gave the stimulus for great judicial and deliberative oratory, awarding office and power to the eloquent: 'Great eloquence, like a flame, is fed by its material and excited by its motion and brightens as it burns' (36.1).

Those familiar with Tacitus' grim portrait of the principate and of a senate already servile and impotent at the death of Augustus cannot escape the irony of Maternus' apparent praise for his own times. We know from the historian's personal comment in *Annals* (4.34–5) that he saw the times he reported as inglorious material in comparison with the life-and-death national struggle and glorious victories of the expanding Republic. This passionate newcomer to the governing class cannot have believed that it was better for Rome that her oratory should atrophy while decisions were made by the single wise ruler without debate.

Given that oratory itself is marginal to our concept of literature, and no longer a significant strand in the rope of literary history, why is the *Dialogus* important? And what can we deduce beyond its courtly conclusion, looking at its premises and formulation? First, the recognition of genres. Tacitus the future historian never seriously puts forward history as an alternative literary career. Since Nepos' lament that Cicero had died without giving Rome a great work of history, Sallust and Livy had established the national achievement in the genre; yet Tacitus mentions history only briefly and obliquely in the *Dialogus*, when Aper blames archaisers for preferring Sisenna and Varro to his contemporaries Servilius Nonianus and Aufidius Bassus. He does not even name the genre, though he itemises tragedy, epic, lyric, elegy, iambic, epigrams, and other forms as parts of eloquence (10.4). Perhaps the advantage of presenting the dispute as a two-way fight between tragedy and oratory was their shared role as vehicles for public ideals: the one too direct; the other safer because more oblique. Their other kinship lay in the increasing cross-fertilisation of poetry and oratory of which we have spoken. Lucan the poet was marked by Quintilian (10.1.90) as more suited for imitation by orators than poets, but clearly the orators of this age were taking from poetry all that they dared. We must not forget that we are seeing the Roman literary world from a special perspective: our speakers are gentlemen, or at least public figures, and their opening approach is in terms of a gentleman's career and the power offered by competing literary forms. There was a tradition that history was written in the public man's years of retirement; hence it was hardly a career to compete with oratory. In fact, the greatest achievements of Roman literature were not composed with these motives or by men of this age and class, and we would do well to see Tacitus' splendid work primarily as a dialogue on the

proper relationship between existing literary forms and public life in a depoliticised society.

Aper's periodisation of Roman oratory, juxtaposing the death of Cicero with the rise of the principate, and dating the beginning of the new style with Cassius Severus, last of the Augustan orators, has generally been taken as Tacitus' own perception, or the common interpretation of his generation. But even Messalla does not accept Severus as the turning-point in the acknowledged decline. We have probably been too ready in the past to transfer Aper's view to all the theorists of the first century, as if they associated the loss of eloquence with either the principate or a specific figure such as Severus.¹⁴ Messalla too declares that when Asinius Pollio pleaded a testamentary case halfway through Augustus' principate 'a long period of peace ... unbroken tranquillity in the senate and particularly the restraining influence of the emperor had combined to pacify eloquence herself, like everything else' (38.2), but this interpretation is new and revolutionary, and the analysis of the decay of oratory at the end of *On Sublimity* should be seen as an echo of Tacitus' politicised account. Such is the power of this brilliant little book that it has redirected subsequent analysis of the so-called 'corruption of eloquence', substituting a political explanation for the traditional moralists' account. Neither explanation, however, will account for the apparent decline of poetry. Neither morality nor political liberty characterised the Neronian age, which produced poetry of originality and power; why then do we find in the next generation only derivative epic and the bread-and-butter epigrams of Martial? Literary history requires in the first instance a literary account of causality.

4 Quintilian

For posterity the most significant figure of this period is Quintilian, Rome's first public Professor of Rhetoric, whose teachings are reflected both in Tacitus' Messalla and in the writings of the younger Pliny. Quintilian's twelve books on the training of the orator (published about AD 95) are not all equally relevant to literary criticism. In the first two books, dealing with education in childhood and early adolescence, we meet only basic recommendations for the child's study of Homer and Virgil, with further reading of selected tragedies. At the next stage the young boy is recommended to read and learn excerpts from New Comedy and become steeped in the historical writing of Livy rather than the dangerously mannered Sallust, and of Cicero, or whichever orators most resemble Cicero (2.5.18–20). For the young, as for older students, Quintilian proposes a classical canon excluding both the primitive authors beloved of the archaisers and the new fashion for flowery and capricious display. Quintilian's table of contents at 2.14.5 organises

¹⁴ Heldmann, *Entwicklung und Verfall*, pp. 255–86.

his theory in the tripartite Alexandrian form seen also in Horace's *Ars poetica*: he will write first about the art of rhetoric, then about the trained artist, and finally about the work of art. But these divisions have no importance until the final book, since the next nine books all deal with aspects of the art. Thus he opens with a doxography of definitions of rhetoric, and the analysis of its genres, also discussing the Hermagorean judicially-oriented analysis of legal issues. Books IV and V are devoted to argumentation in court cases, Book VI to the technique of opening and closing the speech, and the application of pathos and ethos, while Book VII considers the organisation of the parts of a speech. The treatment of pathos shows how much the teaching of rhetoric was now affected by poetry and especially by the predominance of Virgil. Quintilian invokes Virgilian passages to illustrate both pathos and vividness of representation (*enargeia*), analysing the poet's technique in terms that will reappear in the encomium of Macrobius' fourth-century rhetorician Eustathius (*Saturnalia*, Books IV and V). Horace's status is also authoritative, as when Quintilian (6.3.20) illustrates the meaning of *facetus* from Horace's praise of Virgil's *Eclogues* as *molle atque facetum* ('delicate and smart').

Books VIII and IX, discussing *elocutio* (diction and style), influenced the stylistic theory of the later Middle Ages, which adapted them along with recommendations of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* into the Arts of Poetry, and influenced also the discussion and practice of prose style in the fifteenth century. Quintilian begins with the prerequisites of discourse – clear and correct speech; then he considers ornament both in the use of individual words and in their combination. This section is interesting for his presentation of types of fault in diction, loosely grouped under *cacozelia* ('affectation') and stress on *Romanus pudor* – a combination of restraint and outright prudery in the avoidance of sounds even vaguely suggesting obscenity. Here for the first time (8.3.60) Horace's Letter to the Pisones is cited as the *Ars poetica*, as Quintilian compares the incongruity of mixing sublime and humble words, old words and new, or poetic and colloquial vocabulary to the visual monster with which Horace opens his poem. There is a careful analysis of similes (8.3.72–82), distinguishing as most effective the Virgilian type in which correspondence between simile and context is fully developed. It is when discussing *affectus* and *ornatus* (emotional effect and ornament), that Quintilian most often invokes Virgil's example. Virgil is also cited as a model for the art of amplification, perhaps because Quintilian had inherited a similar reference to Homer in the Greek tradition; certainly he singles out, from *Iliad* III, Priam's statement that Helen is a worthy justification for the sufferings of war, noting how the circumstances and choice of speaker intensify the effect of Priam's words (8.4.21). The criteria of utility, moderation, and propriety guide Quintilian as is shown by another allusion to Horace; protesting against affectation (8.3.8) he anticipates that one of the modern 'corrupt' stylists may call him an enemy of *cultus*, and

answers by opposing the real cultivation of a productive farm to the barren flowerbeds that Horace deplures in *Odes* 2.15.

In Quintilian's analysis of tropes and figures of thought and speech, it is worth isolating the elements that are peculiar to his own 'Silver' age. Many are tied to the new cult of irony, innuendo, and suggestion, such as *emphasis* which gives loaded significance to ordinary words, as in 'be a man!' (8.3.86); or *noema*, which aims to suggest the unspoken by its wording, a type illustrated from declamation and from orators now lost to us (8.5.12); or *ironia* and the whole concept of the *figurata controversia*, a discourse which carries its true reference below the surface. On this he shrewdly comments that it is adopted for three reasons: if it is unsafe to speak plainly; if it is indecent to do so; or purely as an ornament (9.2.66). The fictional eloquence of the declamations favoured the first type, for example when addressing tyrants, but Quintilian is quick to point out that the feared authority would see through such disguise and be as resentful of its obliquity as of open criticism: in real life such a mode is not prudent (9.2.69). Most characteristic of Silver Latin prose is the *sententia*, defined by Quintilian as a conspicuous saying, and often used to round off a unit of discourse (8.4.2). These could be pointed sayings specific to the subject, or general aphorisms, and a common form was the comment or 'moral' used to sum up an anecdote, the *epiphonema*. He warns against the hazards of this feature of oratory (8.5.20–5), the far-fetched word play, the excess of such pointed sayings, which can obstruct each other like trees in a forest, their disjunctive effect creating a break in the flow of speech after which the speaker must restart his momentum. Worst of all is the infectious tendency to utter whole speeches as if each sentence carried point, giving a false resonance to simple statement. Yet he recognises the importance of this ornament and cites its use by Cicero and Virgil to support its legitimacy when used with restraint; there is a proper degree of *cultus* which stops short of culpable excess.

Descriptive criticism and literary history alike have been sought in the critical survey of Greek and Roman authors contained in the first chapter of Book X, but we must remember that authors are considered only for their beneficial effect on the would-be orator. Quintilian first compares and contrasts the styles of poetry, history, and philosophy as nourishment for prose style (10.1.27–36); readers of the *Dialogus* might note that Quintilian, like Cicero in *Orator*, recognises History as a literary form close to poetry with aspects of style that the orator should avoid; it is defined (10.1.31) as epic in prose, narrative, not demonstrative, composed as a record, not for controversy, and aiming at intellectual renown. Thus it avoids monotony with recondite words and daring figures. For orators its style is most suited to the digression, not the argument. The virtues shared by history and poetry appear in Quintilian's discussion of poetry itself as energy of content, sublimity of diction, emotional effect, and psychological interest from

character drawing (10.1.27); its hazards for the speaker are boldness in vocabulary and expression unsuited to the courtroom.

In his assessment of specific authors, Quintilian's Greek listings (10.1.46–84) confirm the canon already known to us from *On Imitation* by Dionysius, but only the most favoured authors, Homer, Euripides, and Menander, are given detailed appreciation. Rhetoricians clearly had favourite passages in Homer, such as the embassy to Achilles, and had picked out the plums from the pie: speeches of consolation, exhortation, and encomium. Quintilian finds in Homer models for every part of a judicial speech from exordium to peroration. Hesiod in comparison is assigned to the middle style, praised for his useful aphorisms and easy language. Confronted by a later Greek writer such as Apollonius Rhodius, not included in the traditional canon, Quintilian's assessment is less specific than, for example, his praise of Pindar for his spirit, his great sayings, his command of figures, wealth of vocabulary, and flow of eloquence. But this may derive not from the Greek tradition but from Horace's great Ode (4.2): 'whoever strives to imitate Pindar ...' Euripides and Menander are recommended for the same qualities: their naturalism of diction and subtlety of characterisation. Menander is called the single most fertile source of invention and expression, and yet the plays commended are unknown to us apart from *Epitrepontes*. Finally it is his decorum, both in propriety and in appropriate characterisation, that wins Menander the emphatic final position balancing Homer in the evaluation of the Greek poets (10.1.69–72).

The Roman assessments (10.1.85–131) are more significant, in that they are not predetermined by the Alexandrian canon, though Quintilian couches his judgements in terms of a contrast between the two literatures, with one or the other winning each bout. As with Greek hexameter poetry, Quintilian makes no formal distinction between epic and didactic. Macer and Lucretius, whose form and purpose we would measure against the *Georgics*, are criticised simply for style, Macer for his dullness of diction, Lucretius for his difficulty. From Quintilian's viewpoint Ennius was more to be revered than imitated; Ovid, on the other hand is depreciated, as 'too much in love with his own talent' (10.1.88), and reproached with frivolity. We owe to Quintilian the recognition of satire as a Roman genre; in that context Latin wins by default (10.1.93). But though he includes Menippean satire, Quintilian's generic system only partially matches his material; Petronius is not mentioned either as an author of Menippean satire or of romance, whereas Ovid is treated under epic, elegy, and drama, and Seneca, ignored under the rubric of tragedy, rounds off the generic list in a way that may include him among the philosophers, or deliberately segregate his contagion to spare the student, as in the passage quoted earlier in this chapter. Elegy is regarded as a Roman success; so is historical writing – at last. Ovid and Varius earn the accolade of being a match for the Greeks in tragedy, but the same change of taste that turns

Quintilian away from Ennius makes him despair of comedy as Rome's biggest failure. His explanation lies in the nature of Latin itself in contrast with the charm of Menander's Greek, a theme expanded in the important chapter on style (12.10) to be discussed below.

Quintilian reserves his most detailed and loving analysis for the comparison of Cicero with his great model Demosthenes (10.1.105–12), attempting from his Roman point of view what Longinus presents from the Greek. He recognises their common excellence of structure and strategy in argumentation; he notes also the greater diversity and compression of Demosthenes' pungent wit, contrasted with Cicero's broader and heavier approach: Demosthenes is seen as pared to the effective minimum, Cicero as developed to the full. In the end Quintilian awards the prize to Cicero for his wit and power to stir compassion. He also includes Cicero's dialogues and letters (now for the first time treated as a literary text) in his evaluation. We may smile when he attributes to Cicero the power of Demosthenes, the abundance of Plato, and the charm of Isocrates, but the student of Cicero knows that he consciously trained himself to emulate precisely these merits of these authors. He was after all the continuing prose model of educated Latinists, even the Christians, Jerome and Augustine and the humanists of the Renaissance, just as he became the model for formal vernacular prose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As the chapter on authors for imitation is concerned with their stylistic qualities, it is not surprising that there are overlaps of argument with the latter discussion of *genera dicendi*, or the levels of style (12.10). Only in this last book does Quintilian treat the artist as an individual, considering his moral character and education and proper behaviour in the profession before he moves to the finished composition, the third and shortest unit of his tripartite scheme. He opens with the acknowledgement that the level of achievement in oratory reflects both the taste of the speaker and that of his society: oratory is compared with painting and sculpture as arts that have passed through a primitive stage before youthful development and subsequent maturity. He takes over from Greek theory the tension between the ideals of realism (*veritas*) and beauty (*pulchritudo*), meaningful for sculpture depicting realistic men and beautiful gods, but not fully integrated into his own rhetorical application, where the sense of *veritas* as real life is always positive and often contrasted with the mere pretence of declamation. Relativism in taste is illustrated by the reception of Cicero, criticised by his younger successors as inflated, diffuse, sing-song and even effeminate, yet in later generations reproached as dry and bare. Quintilian owes to Cicero's *Brutus* and *Orator* most of his comments on the Atticists, but adds an interesting comment in answering Santra's explanation of Attic oratory: Santra claimed that Asiatic Greeks developed their verbosity and circumlocutory phrasing because they aimed at eloquence without adequate command of the language. Quintilian

answers that this is rather the product of a taste for boasting and display in both speakers and audience (12.10.16–19): again the recognition that bad style is more often the product of bad judgement than of incompetence.

Quintilian adds to the traditional topics a fascinating comparison of the two languages (12.10.27–34), praising Greek for the beauty and musicality of Z and Y, and of the ringing terminal N in declension, while deploring in Latin the ugly roughness of F and consonantal U, especially after Q, and the mooring M termination of many Latin inflexions. He regrets the monotony of Latin accentuation, which always left the final syllable unaccented (equated with Greek grave accent) and if the penultimate syllable was short would leave two dragging unaccented syllables. Worse, Latin has too poor a vocabulary and writers have to use circumlocutions to substitute for missing concepts. No wonder Roman poets delighted to introduce Greek words for their musical appeal. The Roman orator must compensate with the positive assets of Latin, exploiting fullness of expression to offset lack of subtle precision; he must rely on emotional effect, imagery, weight, and energy of language, just as a large ship has to manoeuvre differently from a lighter craft. Quintilian realises that to the Latin speaker the greatest challenge was the simple style of the small-scale case, but commends the success of Cicero or Calidius in this plainer mode. He follows Cicero's *Orator* in matching each stylistic level to a function, the plain style for argument, the middle to win over or delight the audience, and the passionate grand style to sway men towards the desired decision. From Cicero again he derives the Homeric models of Menelaus for plain speaking, Nestor for charming conciliatory speech, and Ulysses for persuasive grandeur. Quintilian's refinement on this is to allow for a whole graded spectrum of ornament with which the orator can satisfy both the ignorant and the connoisseurs among the audience; for real superiority shows itself in two ways: the great orator will outclass the average performer when his turn comes to speak, and while others may win approval from many, there will be no one to find fault with the truly great speaker.

5 *Pliny the Younger and Juvenal*

Quintilian offered his pupils hope that their oratory would be both needed and a worthy continuation of the tradition. It is the exalted note on which his great treatise ends (12.11.25–30). Many of his themes are reflected in the letters of his pupil Pliny (AD 62–113), but somehow what is sound sense in Quintilian leads to self-conscious eclecticism in Pliny's theory and lack of economy in his practice. An early letter encloses a speech which Pliny has been composing with special stylistic care, imitating Demosthenes and the Roman Calvus in his use of figures but 'resorting to Cicero's paintpots wherever there is scope for an appealing digression' (1.2). In forwarding his *Panegyric* to a friend he notes the problems of the genre: the material is so

familiar that the audience gives all its attention to the style, but most will miss his subtlety of organisation and the variation in ornament and tone without which a continuously elevated speech would be monotonous (3.13). A longer letter (1.20) pleads the case for copiousness against the advocates of Attic brevity: only fullness can achieve the two functions of pleasing and persuading, and great speeches were as long in actual performance as the written versions we admire.

Another letter (5.8) offers a fresh topic: the appeal and reward of composing history instead of oratory. The letter professes to answer a request from the historian Titinius Capito that Pliny compose a history. Yes, he is tempted, especially as oratory has to be consummate to endure, but 'History charms, however it is written'. His own incentive is not some political or moral message he is burning to offer, nor even an interest in a particular period, but the desire for immortality; he confesses that he is attracted by the glorious, lofty material, the scope for luxuriant ornament, the sweet smooth-flowing style with its wider vocabulary and different periodic form from that of oratory. But his request that Capito select a theme for him shows an indifference which suggests that the entire letter may have been planned as an exercise in comparative criticism.

Elsewhere certainly he is more confident of the immortal prospects of oratory. Let two more letters illustrate his principles in training the young orator and methods of preparing his own work. He urges (7.9) young Fuscus to practise translation and paraphrase, to exercise himself in short verse forms, and in composing a literary letter or a historical passage – the latter to develop descriptive skills, the former to cultivate economy and elegance. As for reading in each genre, there are the prescribed authors whom Fuscus will know without prompting. For his own work Pliny adopts the process of serial and collective criticism: 'I let no type of correction pass: first I go over what I have written by myself, then I read it to two or three friends; presently I pass it on to others for comment, and if I am in doubt reconsider their criticisms with one or two more. Finally I read it aloud to a larger group, and, believe me, it is then that I correct most zealously' (7.17.7). Pliny admits to hoping his speeches will give lasting pleasure to posterity, but his own diligence and the politeness of his friends could only increase or elaborate his text, and the *Panegyric* of which he was so proud reads as though he could not bear to omit any ingenuity that occurred to him. The nearest parallel in rhetorical history is the *Panathenaicus* of the aging Isocrates, product of the same gestational overkill.

The Roman poet of the second century was a far cry from the poet-teacher of Aristophanes, or the poet-spokesman of national aspirations whom Horace proposed. Literature had been socialised, falling between the truly public and the genuinely personal utterance. It was an accepted leisure occupation, and for epigrammatists or writers of commissioned lyric such as Statius it could

be a source of support. But the idealist poet who lived to compose would be heard less often than the patron. Horace had complained that 'skilled and unskilled alike we all compose' (*Ep.* 2.1.111). Juvenal returns to this topic in his seventh satire, protesting that poets starved while a patron's verses occupied the muses' temple. His fine satire has a burst of resentment against recitations, ranging from an epic *Theseid* through tragedies on Telephus and Orestes (were these actual, and if so were they Euripidean?) to *togatae*, a form of Italianised comedy long obsolete, and even elegy; and the poetic *topoi* which he cites recall the purple patches of Horace's warning in *Ars poetica*. Pliny knew and admired men who composed comedy and elegy, and justifies his own hendecasyllables (5.3), not by their literary merit, but the social precedents of elder statesmen who had composed similar indelicate verse. Poetry was a diversion to vary the other types of rhetorical exercise. Technique came easily since it was borrowed from the creative Virgil or his contemporaries. Inspiration, since men did not wait for it, fled like Astraea to more innocent writers in other lands.

6 Fronto and Gellius

Juvenal should not always be taken at face value, and though he speaks of starving historians (7.98–104), Tacitus was still composing his greatest work in the second decade of the second century. Prose literature survived until the middle of the century, growing gradually more barren with the loss of purpose beyond its own creation. Quintilian had warned in the preface to his eighth book that 'some make no end of quibbling: they linger over almost every syllable, and even when the best words have been found, go on hunting for something more archaic, obscure, and unexpected, not realising that content is the loser when it is the words that are praised'. Did he anticipate the works of Cornelius Fronto?

Fronto, consul (AD 143) and imperial tutor to Marcus Aurelius and his brother Verus, continuously exhorts his charges to amass collections of synonyms, hunt out rare and splendid words, and distinguish between the place, rank, weight, age, and dignity of words (*On Eloquence* 1.1). Contemporaries of Sallust at the end of the Republic had derided him for employing Ateius Philologus to hunt up archaisms from the elder Cato. Fronto admires no writer more than Sallust, unless it be the early poet Ennius or Cato himself. Faced with the legitimate goal of persuading the philosophically inclined Marcus to produce inspiring imperial addresses, he cites the use of figures of thought by Chrysippus; elsewhere (II, p. 49 Haines) he classifies the poets according to the three styles: Lucilius is *gracilis* (plain), Lucretius sublime (the grand style), Pacuvius *mediocris* (the middle or blended style),¹⁵ then passes on

¹⁵ Cf. Gellius 6.14, where Varro is said to have assigned Terence to the middle style and Pacuvius to the grand.

to other types of characterisation which suggest some familiarity with the Greek theory of *ideai*, to be discussed in chapter 10, section 5 below. More original are the criticisms he directs chiefly at Seneca and his nephew Lucan in the letter *On Speeches* (II, pp. 101f.). Seneca, he admits, is rich in ideas but 'his thoughts go trot-trot, nowhere strain at a gallop under the spur, nowhere show fight or aim at sublimity'. He condemns the opening of the *Bellum Civile* for Lucan's repeated variations on the same point, turning the poet's cry 'shall there never be an end?' against his own sentence structure. Given Fronto's limited interest in Greek poetry it is surprising that he cites Apollonius Rhodius as a counter-example, for the economy of his opening lines. Despite traditional precepts such as 'the supreme eloquence is to speak of sublime things in the grand style, of homely things in simple language', his advice would merely produce the affectations he seeks to avoid.¹⁶ The marvel is that Fronto's spiritual disciple, Aulus Gellius, escapes the fussy mannerisms and obsessions of the older man. Gellius has an intelligent approach to the old writers he loves, leaving us not only fragments of authors otherwise lost, but also critical comparisons more analytical and often more discriminating than in earlier sources.

We owe to Gellius an unusual correlation of literary and political history based on earlier researches by Nepos and Varro. His synoptic time chart of Greek and Rome includes poets and orators as milestones in literary growth, from Homer and Hesiod through Archilochus to Aeschylus and Empedocles, then (set in the next generation) Sophocles and Euripides, leading to the flowering of philosophy. On the Roman side his material reflects the sources of Cicero's *Brutus*, but in keeping with his own taste Gellius stops with Lucilius whom he admires both as poet and critic (17.21.49).

Gellius' enthusiasm for early writers is combined with a moral sentimentality which has been aptly called 'socio-linguistic atavism';¹⁷ it is the old conviction of the moral superiority of the ancestors; yet for all his devotion to the elder Cato's oratory he can measure the difference between his beloved primitives and Cicero. In a comparison of excerpts from Gaius Gracchus and Cicero (6.3) he calls Cicero's speech brilliant, pleasing, harmonious, whereas Gracchus, despite the natural appeal and patina of antiquity, is rough, brusque, and unrefined. Citing Cato's great speech for the Rhodians, he concludes that Cato was not content with the eloquence of his own day, but strove for the effects which Cicero achieved (10.3). In another passage (12.2) he reacts violently against Seneca's criticism of Cicero and Virgil for adapting Ennian tags, 'harsh, irregular, and lumbering verses'. In a lost letter Seneca had accused Virgil of doing so to palliate, by apparent archaism, the shock of his new styled poetry for 'the people of Romulus'. Gellius notes that many

¹⁶ In fairness to Fronto, note that only his correspondence survives, much damaged in a palimpsest manuscript.

¹⁷ Baldwin, *Studies*, p. 52.

people in his day thought Seneca's diction low and vulgar, and condemned Seneca's phrasing and composition for its hollow, emotional urgency or empty cleverness of expression; yet there were others who recognised his lack of refinement in language but praised his learning and moral earnestness as itself a source of aesthetic appeal. What is significant here is perhaps less the see-saw of aesthetic preferences over three centuries than the vocabulary and framework of our critic. He has a formidably nuanced vocabulary for stylistic criticism, and although style still receives more attention than content, its traditional components – diction, composition, and ornament – are less prominent than aspects of tone and tempo. The age of Gellius and Fronto neither admired nor employed the pointed disjunctive urgency of Seneca or of Aper's friends, nor apparently did it cherish the rhythm and proportion of the Ciceronian period. Vocabulary is the focus of second-century prescriptive criticism and the most distinctive feature of its own writing.

Thus a typical sequence in Gellius, the chapters from 13.21 to 31, includes five literary discussions, all concerned with words: one discussion notes the relationship of variant word forms such as *urbes/urbis* to euphony, and scans the text of Virgil for his original practice; another (13.25) considers the distinction between certain synonyms and the literary effect of accumulations of synonyms in Homer and Cicero. Virgil's imitation of Parthenius in deploying Greek proper names with special metrical licence is compared with a Virgilian imitation of Homer (13.27), and the last three chapters deal respectively with Fronto, on the solemnity of the archaic expression 'with many mortals', with the changed semantics of the noun *facies*, and with the interpretation of the Varronian expression 'a dog's dinner'. A literary critic today would call this philology, but these niceties are certainly relevant to the appreciation of the ancient texts.

There is genuine literary judgement in Gellius' evaluation of Caecilius' comedy *The Necklace* in relation to its Menandrian model (2.23). Gellius demonstrates the crudity of the Roman version by citing three excerpts from both versions, showing how Caecilius has replaced or omitted subtle details and inserted the typical clichés of the mime, with wisecracks about bad breath and vomiting; he notes how Caecilius reduced eight swift, allusive lines to four lines of swollen tragic diction. Many of the critical discussions focus on Virgil; a sample (17.10) is criticism attributed to Favorinus of the description of Mount Aetna in *Aeneid* III, comparing it with Virgil's model in Pindar *Pythian* 1; Favorinus, who assumed Virgil had not reached the final version of his text, condemns the Latin version as inflated and hyperbolic, but also makes the same complaint against Pindar himself. We can understand his dislike for Virgil's conceit of flames 'licking the stars', but these are prosaic objections inimical to the spirit of epic or lyric poetry. In an earlier passage (9.9) on Virgil's adaptation of Theocritus, Gellius notes that Virgil did not try to incorporate what he could not convert into Latin, but adds praise for

the poet's original contribution. There are in fact many changes from Theocritus' third *Idyll* to Virgil's fifth *Eclogue*. Gellius is also our witness (9.9.12f.) for Valerius Probus' criticisms of Virgil's adaptation (*Aen.* 1.498f.) of the Homeric simile comparing Nausicaa among her maids to Artemis (*Od.* 6.102f.). Probus had chiefly argued from propriety, but also objected that Virgil's description of Dido omitted the Homeric stress on the heroine's conspicuous beauty (although Dido's beauty could not have helped standing out against the elder statesmen around her). In this, as in Probus' criticism of the scene between Venus and Vulcan in *Aeneid* VIII, we sample the methods and excesses of Virgilian criticism, essentially a reaction against his preeminence. Gellius has the sense to repudiate Probus' prudishness about the word *membra*, but seems to accept the general censure of the scene.

We are in the world of *epigoni*; respect for their predecessors and a good grammatical and rhetorical training lead the educated men of the second century to preserve what is valuable and apply the knowledge they have to criticism of the specific text, but as literary criticism the formality and triviality is stifling. Nowhere do we find an interest in principles of organisation or characterisation, or even in allegory within the epic that was the Romans' greatest exemplar of creative literature. The work as a whole is revered without attempts to understand its form or value system, and these negatives apply even more strongly to second-century criticism of less canonical authors and texts. We leave the classical period of Latin literature with an impression of ingrowing methods, that can only repeat or elaborate themselves. But between Gellius and the next important Latin secular critics, Macrobius and Servius, six generations of political turmoil and literary infertility are best passed in silence. In the interim, Christian writers began to wrestle with the value of the Classics and the interpretation of texts, a topic resumed in chapter 11 below.