The traditional picture of the Flavian emperors, and especially the last of them, depended almost exclusively on the evidence provided by near contemporary literary sources, especially those written in Latin and familiar to most classical scholars. Of these sources, Tacitus, Suetonius and Juvenal were pre-eminent. In support of their credibility was the remarkable consistency apparent in their joint portrayal of the oppressive nature of Domitian’s principate in its last phase. Their powerful and mutually supportive testimony was accepted as authoritative, even though the publication of all three authors’ works occurred subsequent to the fall of the Flavian dynasty. Though their texts date to the time of Trajan or even later, the authors had nevertheless lived under Domitian and had experienced that period of tyranny at first hand. Furthermore, Tacitus in his Agricola had provided a convincing explanation why such works could not have been published earlier (Agr. 2): freedom of expression especially on any matter with political implications had been effectively abolished under Domitian, a time of book burnings, prosecutions of authors, banishment of philosophers and other intellectuals, and open encouragement of delatores (‘informers’) to inform on and prosecute dissenters. Adempto per inquisitiones etiam loquendi audiendique commercio (‘Even the normal interchange of speaking and listening was curtailed by

---

1 Domitian has been traditionally pictured as ‘[i]mperious, suspicious, and with a curious streak of cruelty mingled with superstition…. Domitian has never earned any man’s love and has found few indeed to praise him’: Henderson (1927) 11. His evil reputation was preserved and exaggerated by Christian writers, and Gibbon’s view, based on a thorough knowledge of the ancient sources is encapsulated in his statement that: ‘Under the mild administration of Titus, the Roman world enjoyed a transient felicity, and his beloved memory served to protect, above fifteen years, the vices of his brother Domitian’. Waters (1964) 49 states that: ‘His character however is still allowed to be painted in terms of the malevolent attacks of hostile witnesses’; see also Southern (1997) viii: ‘Domitian has been portrayed by some authors as a monstrous tyrant, an inflexible pedant with no imagination, an incompetent general’.
spying’); memoriam quoque ipsam cum uoce perdidissemus, si tam in nostra potestate esset oblivisci quam tacere (‘We would have lost memory itself along with our ability to speak out, if it were as easy for us to forget as to keep silent’). Though it was recognised that Tacitus might have had additional motives in writing this passage, such as defending himself from imputations of pusillanimity in his own dealings with Domitian or manipulating the new emperor Trajan into creating a more tolerant and supportive cultural environment for the future, his evocation of ‘a reign of terror’ under the previous regime carried conviction in the eyes of most modern commentators.

Until recently, that is. Revisionist historical interpretation of the careers and personalities of Roman emperors stands out as one of the typical activities of modern research in the field of ancient history. It invariably involves a radical scepticism about the characterisation of the emperor conveyed by the literary sources, on the grounds that those sources are certain to be biased, being a product of the educated classes resentful of the limitation of the senate’s privileges by the new constitutional arrangement that Augustus had instituted. Roman historiography, by a tradition going back to the Elder Cato, was a genre practised by members of the senatorial class and its whole tradition reflects a senatorial point of view. In a reversal of the usual maxim, that history is always written by the victor, the underlying principle of the modern rejection of the literary portrayal of these emperors seems to be that Roman imperial history was always written by the losers, and is therefore highly suspect. Since the impetus of the work of Waters in the 1960s, modern historians have gradually rehabilitated Domitian’s reputation to the point where a new orthodoxy has emerged best represented by the two biographies published in the 1990s by Jones and Southern.² Both scholars pride themselves on their independence from the ‘bias of the literary sources’³ and especially from the Tacitean portrait of the emperor that succeeded ‘only in obscuring him’.⁴ Jones is concerned

³ E.g., Jones (1992) 196: ‘Assessing Domitian’s character and that of his reign is bedevilled by two separate factors, the bias of the literary sources and the judgemental standards adopted by the aristocracy. . . . These factors have been responsible for much, but not all, of the hostility directed at Domitian’.