CHAPTER 6

Cicero’s Quarrels
Reception and Modernity from Horace to Tacitus

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In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.

M AR SHALL BERMAN

There was a form of modernity [modernité] for every painter of the past [peintre ancien].

B A UD E LA I RE

1 Introduction: Cicero and the Modern

Around the transition from the first to second centuries of our era, as the Roman Empire was nearing its height, the historian Tacitus (ca. 56–118 C.E.) wrote a single work on literary criticism: the *Dialogue on Orators*, which dramatized his elders’ debate over the decline of eloquence in their own time. Almost to a man, Tacitus’s speakers agree that, since the golden age of the subject of this volume, the orator, statesman, philosopher, and poet, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), the ability to speak persuasively and stylishly that they call eloquence has, with the advent of autocracy, declined (Dial. 41.7f.). In the words of Tacitus’s character Maternus, the most respected figure of the group: “What need for lots of harangues to the people when it is not the unsophisticated multitude who make decisions about the Republic, but one man”—the

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emperor—“the wisest and alone?” Crucially, however, the group is not unanimous. One speaker, Marcus Aper rejects this position, insisting that the accomplishments of the modern orator measure up to and perhaps even surpass those of the past. In making this claim, paradoxical to his interlocutors, Aper in fact resorts to a proper paradox, invoking Cicero, exemplar of past eloquence, in his very dismissal of past eloquence (Dial. 22.1): “I come to Cicero, who had the same fight with his contemporaries as I am having with you,” he declares; “for those men idealized the ‘ancients’ [antiquos], but he himself preferred the eloquence of his own time.”

With Aper’s paradoxical declaration, Tacitus’s Dialogue on Orators becomes one of the first instances of the so-called “quarrel of the ancients and the moderns,” that is, the perennial asking of the question: “Is antiquity exemplary and what does it mean to imitate it?” Turning on a paradox as it does, Tacitus’s treatment of Cicero distills diametrically opposed responses to Cicero in a stroke: as if putting the orator in parentheses, Aper both rejects Cicero’s canonicity and encapsulates the entire tradition of Roman rhetoric in Cicero’s name. More straightforward than this irreverent speaker, Tacitus’s slightly younger contemporary Quintilian soon recuperated Cicero in twelve volumes with his monumental Orator’s Education (cf. Brink 1989). In it, as Alain Gowing (2013: 250) has recently suggested, Quintilian’s recuperation centers on the orator not as a person but rather as a personification (Quint. I.O. 10.1.122):

“And this is why he was said, not without desert, to be the king of legal proceedings among the men of his own age and to have in fact acquired among posterity that ‘Cicero’ is no longer held as the name of a person [hominis nomen], but of eloquence.” Quintilian’s abstraction of “Cicero” from Cicero did not happen overnight, but rather after what Gowing (2013: 234) has also called “a century of (relative) silence.” Many examples of such silence could be provided (see Gowing 2013: 234–239), but for the purposes of the present discussion, one will suffice: taking up literary history where Cicero left it in his dialogue the Brutus, Tacitus’s probable model for the Dialogue on Orators (Stroup 2010: 272f., cf. Mayer 2001: 27–31), the Augustan poet Horace (65–8 B.C.E.) wrote a letter to

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