Van den Berg, C.S.


Tacitus’ _Dialogus de Oratoribus_ is an elusive work. It has engaged many generations of scholars, provoking them to ask all kinds of questions and adopt varied approaches which have often led to their own several cul-de-sacs. It took a long time even to demonstrate convincingly that the work is not spurious and was indeed written by the great historian. Another vexed question is that of the decline of eloquence. Being the starting-point of the dialogue it is, understandably, taken for granted by many. It means, however, reading the _Dialogus_ as a pamphlet, not a dialogue, and discarding the modernist discourse it contains itself—not to mention Tacitus’ own modern style as it is exemplified in the _Annals_ and _Histories_. A third pitfall, related to the previous one, is a frequent tendency to view the _Dialogus_ as a set of separate and even incompatible speeches rather than a dialogue (“persuasion-oriented readings”, as van den Berg calls them, see pp. 67-88). This may prompt the view that the work is flawed, unbalanced, lacking closure; or, fourthly, it may induce readers to choose sides in the debate, because they feel that one speaker must be right and the others in the wrong. When this happens, Maternus usually prevails, being accorded the honourable position of mouthpiece for Tacitus’ ‘real’ opinions, while poor Aper is discredited as an opportunist whose _mores_ are as corrupt as his oratory (“character-oriented readings”, see pp. 59-66).

Van den Berg discusses these and similar tendencies in the first part of his work, which apart from an astute _status quaestionis_ contains a laudably broad, thorough, and even-handed introduction to the _Dialogus_. We find (chapter 1) a summary of the dialogue, which doubles as reader’s guide, because it highlights concepts and strategies and raises questions that will recur in a sustained manner in the detailed discussions that follow.1 But first we are provided with other tools in the shape of contexts. Tacitus’ life and the date of the _Dialogus_ pass the review (treated as a background to developments in _eloquentia_ rather than the subject of an intricate and probably unsolvable debate); but van den Berg also treats the role of oratory in public life, Plato’s and Cicero’s dialogues (especially _De Oratore_) as forerunners, declamation as an ethopoetic hermeneutic tool that also facilitates the “synecdochic fallacy” (of identifying with a single speaker), and the worn topos of decline. A coda points towards one of the book’s major claims: that the style of large parts of the _Dialogus_, especially

---

1 The appendix contains a convenient sentence-by-sentence summary of the entire _Dialogus_.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2016 | DOI 10.1163/1568525X-12342367
when Aper is speaking, shows so much similarity with Tacitus’ other works that an unproblematic assumption of the decline of oratory is doomed to fail. The *status quaestionis* in chapter 2 is followed by an account of van den Berg’s own approach, which he describes as “argumentative dynamics” and which in fact simply entails a sound close reading of the dialogue as dialogue, that is, as a text in which different claims are constantly being put forward in order to be tested by both interlocutors and readers, and in which apparent and real inconsistencies are not flaws but devices to incite readers to challenge and refine their own views.

The consistent employment of this approach yields many refreshing insights. So, for example, does chapter three draw attention to the importance of the interstitial passages between the interlocutors’ speeches, which usually do not receive a great deal of attention. Van den Berg makes a clear case that these passages are not merely bland transitions from one speech to the other but function as hermeneutic tools, because they introduce key concepts of *laus* and *fama*, *ingenium* and *iudicium*. As such, they point at the possibility that the alleged decline may not so much concern the quality of oratory as the renown that is to be gained by it. Also, they frame the six speeches as providing as many sets of criteria for assessing *eloquentia*, so that “we end up with six compelling orations, each of which addresses different factors contributing to the formation of *eloquentia*” (p. 140). In chapter four we learn that the first pair, in which Aper attacks Maternus’ decision to reject oratory in favour of poetry and Maternus defends his choice, not only contains a rehabilitation of Aper as more than just a glorified *delator*—that has been done before—but also substantially nuances the picture of Maternus as the embodiment of *libertas*, thereby incidentally pointing towards a defusion of the “two Maternus problem”.2 Equally importantly, van den Berg manages to demonstrate that the examples given by both speakers undermine their main arguments, and distils from this apparent flaw a more general, if not unproblematic approach towards an assessment of *eloquentia as a whole*. Chapter five scrutinises the second and third debates. Aper’s modernism turns out to be compatible with Roman tradition, finding a model e.g. in Cicero, and may be preferred to Messalla’s anachronistic antiquarianism. On the other hand, sobering observations are offered on Maternus’ final speech, which is traditionally regarded as the best speech and

---

2 It is difficult to come to terms with Maternus’ approval of the principate in his second speech if his first one is read as directed against the principate. Van den Berg reasonably points out that the *Dialogus* never makes clear which powerful person(s) Maternus offended, and argues that “no single unambiguous piece of evidence exists in the *Dialogus* which requires us to see Maternus as anti-principate or anti-Vespasian” (p. 156).