

Temporal Rhetoric and Historical Experience in Tacitus’s *Dialogus de Oratoribus*: Aper’s definition of Age Revisited

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Abstract

This paper examines Aper’s definition of age (16.5–18.1) in Tacitus’s *Dialogus de Oratoribus* through the lens of temporal rhetoric. By analysing how temporal rhetoric operates according to Aper and across the *Dialogus*, I explore the agonistic temporality which exists within this work as well as the experiences it gives to its listeners and readers. By defining antiquity and narrating contemporary history, Aper’s second speech (15–27) presents complex interactions and interruptions between different layers of time. This evokes expectations and experiences for both the immediate audience and the later readers of the *Dialogus*. Aper’s definition is then compared with the temporal rhetoric employed by other interlocutors: primarily Messalla’s counterpoint on the deterioration of educational practices and Maternus’s narrative on gradual decline from the Golden Age. Central to my argument is that the *Dialogus* is a narrative in which the interlocutors wield historical narratives of varying time scales as rhetorical weapons, deploying temporal frameworks to construct multifaceted historical experiences. These competing temporal perspectives among different speakers—as well as the self-contesting dimensions within a single speech—provide possible explanations for contradictions in the text. Crucially, the *Dialogus*’s openness in narrative time mirrors its thematic openness regarding the decline of oratory. Additionally, its polyphonic temporality mirrors its dynamic generic character, compelling us to reconcile Tacitus the rhetorician with Tacitus the historian.

Key Words: Tacitus, *Dialogus de Oratoribus*; Aper; Agonistic Temporality; Historical Experience.

1. Introduction

Tacitus’s *Dialogus de Oratoribus* recounts a series of discussions, or debates, between renowned orators who were active during the reign of Vespasian.¹ As a rhetorical work composed by a well-read historian, the *Dialogus* is replete with extensive discussions on historical times and eras, subjects which are fundamental to the central themes and frameworks of historical writings. The opening inquiry by Fabius Iustus to the author directly addresses the themes of antiquity versus modernity and the decline of oratory (1.1):²

cur, cum priora saecula tot eminentium oratorum ingeniis gloriaque floruerint, nostra potissimum aetas deserta et laude eloquentiae orbata vix nomen ipsum oratoris retineat;

Why did previous generations flourish with the great orators of talent and glory, while our own age especially, deserted and bereft of the praise of eloquence, scarcely retains the very name of orator?

The issue of temporal contrast between antiquity and modernity permeates all three dialogues, with Aper’s second speech focusing particularly on the definition of “antiquity/the ancients” (*antiquus*, 15–27). In his redefinition of antiquity (16.5–18.1), Aper employed multiple temporal measurements and utilised a deliberately exaggerated approach to subvert conventional understandings of “ancient”.

In this study, I argue that the *Dialogus* is structured by a dual *agōn*, or contest, between temporal layers, functioning as both rhetorical competition and structural conflict. Externally, this *agōn* pits the speakers’ competing temporal frameworks against one another; internally, self-contesting temporalities within individual arguments generate productive tensions that explain apparent textual contradictions. Rather than merely

¹ The dramatic date hinges on a calculation at *Dial.* 17.3, where Aper’s calculation of 120 years of imperial rule from 43 BCE yields either 77/8 CE or—if *sextam stationem* means “sixth year”—74/5 CE, the latter now favoured by most scholars. The date of composition is commonly set around 100–102 CE, largely on the strength of the dedication to Fabius Iustus (cos. suff. 102), which would place the work after the *Agricola* and the *Germania* but before the *Historiae* and *Annals*; a date soon after Domitian’s death or after 100 CE has also been proposed. For a full discussion see van den Berg 2014, pp. 31–34; see also Whitton 2019, p. 437, n. 152. Whitton further argues that the *Dialogus* must predate Pliny’s *Epistles* Book 1, resting on an examination of the intertextuality between the two (especially *Ep.* 1.11 and 1.20) while refraining from concluding on absolute dating; see pp. 240–245, 437–442.

² All references to the *Dialogus* are based on Winterbottom’s edition (Oxford, 1975). Other text editions are listed in the bibliography. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

advancing immediate polemical goals, the interlocutors employ historical narratives of varying scope as argumentative vehicles. By articulating competing visions of historical time, their multifaceted temporal rhetoric provides audiences and readers with multi-layered historical experiences. Ultimately, the text’s narrative openness—manifested through these temporal structures and their consequent receptive experiences—mirrors its thematic openness regarding the decline of oratory.

Within this framework of temporal conflict, Aper’s discourse is the most sustained instance of this multifaceted rhetorical engagement. All four interlocutors—Curiatius Maternus, Marcus Aper, Vipstanus Messalla, and Iulius Secundus—are distinguished orators; however, Aper is unique in that his biographical details are derived exclusively from the *Dialogus*, appearing in no other historical records.³ In the beginning of the introduction to the characters and context (1.1–5.2) Tacitus briefly sketches Aper’s profile, claiming that he was one of the most eminent orators of his time and had mentored Tacitus in forensic litigation (2.1). Furthermore, through Aper’s own ascribed narrative, we learn that he hailed from Gaul and ascended the ladder of offices (*cursus honorum*), serving as quaestor, tribune, and praetor on the strength of his oratorical talent (7.1). In his two major speeches, Aper first defends the practice of oratory against Maternus’s advocacy of pursuing literary and poetic glory—i.e. the more independent path—by citing its utility (*utilitas*), pleasure (*voluptas*), and fame (*fama*) (5.3–10.8); he subsequently defends contemporary oratory against the asserted supremacy of the ancients (16.4–23.6).⁴ His diverse style, characterised by the frequent use of synonymous doublets, similes, metaphors, and epigrammatic points, fully embodies the formal norms and distinct features of contemporary rhetoric.⁵

³ *The Tacitus Encyclopedia*, pp. 79–80, s.v. Aper, Marcus; Maternus’s identity is also uncertain and has been the subject of recurring scholarly discussion. One possibility is that he corresponds to the Maternus, described by Cassius Dio, who was executed by Domitian in AD 91; see Mayer 2001, pp. 44–45.

⁴ For the contrast between Aper’s emphasis on *utilitas* over *honestum* and the Tacitean ideal exemplified by *Agricola*, see ten Berge 2023, pp. 140–41.

⁵ Luce pointed out that the text of the *Dialogus* presents three antithetical pairs of arguments. Focusing on the structure of Aper’s first speech in particular, Luce noted that after stating the three themes to be argued in the opening, the speech proceeds through the stages of exposition (*tractatio*), examples (*exempla*), refutation (*refutatio*), and conclusion (*conclusio*). At the closure, Aper employs the rhetorical figure of anteoccupation (*anteoccupatio*) to urge Maternus to abandon his defence of poetry; see Luce 1993, p. 27. Mayer provided an overview of Aper’s oratorical style, see Mayer 2001, pp. 45–46.

Historically, Aper’s definition and argumentative approach – according to Messalla’s critique in Chapter 25 – were predominantly characterised by earlier scholars as sophistry. Aper himself was deemed to be inconsistent and contrary throughout the dialogue, with claims that his primary purpose was to advance arguments simply through refutation.⁶ This assessment was shaped by two prevailing interpretive traditions: one that read Maternus as Tacitus’s mouthpiece, citing the similarities in their careers and political views;⁷ and another that drew character correspondences, most notably identifying Aper with the habitual dissenter Antonius in Cicero’s *De Oratore*, given the profound thematic and generic affinities between the two works.⁸ However, post-1990s scholarship has increasingly recognised both the deliberate ambiguities in character portrayal and the open-ended nature of the “decline of oratory” question, giving rise to diverse explanatory approaches.⁹ Such interpretive indeterminacy – evident in the diverse responses to Fabius’s question and the complex figures of the *Dialogus*—has redirected critical inquiry from teleological interpretations towards a refined analysis of Tacitus’s rhetorical techniques and linguistic arts.¹⁰ Even so, teleological assumptions remain evident in the analysis of individual speeches in the *Dialogus*, frequently causing neglect of internal variations in temporal representation, their strategic disposition, and their experiential effects on both intra-textual audiences and readers.

To expose this multifaceted temporal rhetoric and its potential implications, this study selectively draws on Koselleck’s “Zeitschichten”—a stratified model of historical time that moves beyond the conventional linear–cyclical dichotomy¹¹—together with Lianeri’s and Ash’s insights into agonistic relations between temporal

⁶ e.g., Gudeman 1914, p. 293; Barnes 1986, p. 237.

⁷ Syme 1958, p. 111. For a recent, more comprehensive treatment of this perspective, see ten Berge 2023, pp. 120–126, who, through intertextual analysis across Tacitus’ works and by drawing on Pliny the Younger’s interactions, argues that Tacitus adopts a reader-oriented strategy rather than delivering his political and historical views through a single authorial treatise; thus, even if Maternus’s second speech reflects Tacitus’ own perspective most closely, readers may also attend to the different facets of the other speeches.

⁸ For summaries, see Luce 1986, pp. 143–157.

⁹ For observations regarding the sophistication of Tacitus’s characterisations, see Luce 1986, p. 146; Luce 1993, pp. 11–38. See also Champion 1994; Goldberg 1999.

¹⁰ As exemplified by Syson 2009 and most comprehensively developed in van den Berg 2014, with useful overviews provided in Pagán 2015.

¹¹ Koselleck conceptualises historical time as composed of three interdependent layers: singular events, recurring structures, and enduring patterns that transcend individual experience; see Koselleck 2000, pp. 19–26, and for his foundational distinction between “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”, see Koselleck 1979, pp. 349–375.

layers.¹² Jonas Grethlein’s expansion of Koselleck, via Jauß’s horizon of expectation, further clarifies how the interplay between expectation and experience generates narrative temporality and shapes readers’ receptive experience.¹³ Earlier studies have recognised that Aper’s insistence on macro-historical continuity provides a powerful counterpoint to unidirectional narratives of decline.¹⁴ I contend, however, that continuity and unity represent only a single facet of his multifaceted temporal rhetoric. My analysis proceeds through two steps. Firstly, a close reading of Aper’s second speech (16.4–23.6) reveals how his definitions of antiquity and accounts of contemporary history employ layered temporality to create complex interactions between different timeframes. Secondly, the investigation expands into a comparative analysis of temporal rhetoric across all interlocutors, highlighting the interplay among their competing temporal frameworks. Throughout, I show that Tacitus engaged with the *mos dialogorum* model instituted by Cicero to develop his own distinctive dialogic format. The *Dialogus*’s innovative combination of rhetorical refinement and historical consciousness embeds the Tacitean *personae* within both Rome’s rhetorical and historical traditions. By demonstrating how temporal rhetoric bridges these identities, this study advocates for a more integrated reading of Tacitus’s historical and rhetorical works.

2. Defining Antiquity and Modernity: The Temporal Rhetoric in Aper’s Second Speech

When Tacitus claimed to have answered his dedicatee’s question through “memory and records” (*memoria et recordatione*, 1.1) while “scarcely daring to present his own views” (*vix hercule auderem si mihi mea sententia proferenda*), he established a complex authorial persona. It is difficult to believe that he surrendered his personal

¹² Lianeri integrates Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue into Koselleck’s model to reveal the agonistic dimension between temporal layers, proposing a relational, dialogic temporality characterised by interruptions and open-ended possibilities; Lianeri 2018, p. 331. Ash identifies comparable agonistic tensions between past and present in Tacitus’s *Histories* through the use of *syncretism*; Ash 2010, pp. 120–121.

¹³ Grethlein draws on Jauß’s reception-aesthetic “horizon of expectation” (Jauß 1970, pp. 12–37) to argue that the interplay between expectation and experience constitutes a distinct narrative temporality, especially crucial for historical writing; Grethlein 2010, pp. 319–324.

¹⁴ For Aper’s rejection of antiquarianism as part of an early imperial anti-decadence discourse, see Vassiliades 2021, pp. 321–366; on Aper’s continuity model elucidating the *Dialogus*’s central motifs of repetition, continuity, and habitual practice, see Geue 2019, pp. 235–254.

agency to the records entirely, nevertheless, it is equally challenging to discern how he managed to shape these characters into a reconstruction of a silent, yet fully fledged, Tacitus. To find solutions for this issue, I return to Aper’s definition of antiquity in his second speech. This focus is justified not only by the dominance of his voice in the work’s initial half but, more crucially, because this topic best exemplifies the interweaving of different temporal layers and the intersection between Tacitus the orator and Tacitus the historian. In this section, I will conduct a detailed analysis of the temporal rhetoric in Aper’s second speech, revealing its multiple layers of time and diverse receptive experiences. Subsequently, I will examine how these rhetorical strategies interact with other temporal discourses in the *Dialogus*.

The ability to “argue from both perspectives” (*in utramque partem disserendi*, Cic. *Rep.* 3. 9) was fundamental to rhetorical training. By allowing each character to fully express their views on the subject without condemning any position, Tacitus demonstrated his skill in crafting complex characters as an orator and his objectivity as a historian.¹⁵ It should be noted that the interpretation of Aper as a mere contrarian in the *Dialogus* has been largely rejected by contemporary scholarship, with plausible explanations having been advanced for the apparent moral ambiguities and contradictions in his arguments.¹⁶ Rather than framing the relationship between Aper and other interlocutors as simply the manifestation of the opposition naturally shared between a refuter and the refuted, we should instead understand the underlying dynamics as those which connect an orator to their audience and vice versa – that is to say, the dynamics shared between the narrator and a narratee. As an orator, Aper finds himself challenged by listeners who hold opposing views (15.2, 16.3) and as a narrator, he must respond to the expectations of his audience (16.4).

The central thesis of Aper’s second speech maintains that contemporary oratory is not inferior to its ancient counterpart, arguing that both rhetorical styles and audience tastes evolve distinctively across temporal contexts. This position relies on the meticulous framing of historical eras. Historical periods, while not constituting formal dating systems, serve as conceptual dividing lines which impose purposeful, symbolic demarcations upon linear

¹⁵ Luce 1986, pp. 148–150.

¹⁶ Champion 1994, Goldberg 1999.

chronology.¹⁷ Aper’s terminological strategy reveals nuance in his alternating use of temporal lexemes (*aetas*, *aevum*, *saeculum*, *tempus*), and while they often function as stylistic variants, each term carries distinct connotations.¹⁸ Although Aper argues with a specific purpose, his narrative is not strictly unidirectional; it maintains a level of complexity which resists a purely teleological, goal-oriented interpretation. By deconstructing his discourse into smaller, fragmented units, we can better grasp the stratified intentions underlying his definitions. This approach allows for pluralistic readings of individual *exempla*, illuminating both Aper’s complexity and Tacitus’s authorial sophistication in crafting this *persona*.

Aper opens his argument with a provocative interrogation of the term “ancient” (*antiquus*, *interrogabo* 16.4), deliberately unsettling the historical consciousness of his audience. While engaging in this trans-temporal debate, Aper employs retrospective narration to summon historical *exempla*, and to articulate his distinctive vision of past and present. As Levene’s “Literary History” framework demonstrated, the *Dialogus* offers us a “complex and subtle global methodology for understanding literature in historical terms”, but it is made up of “fragmented and discontinuous methodologies that emerge from each of the speeches taken separately.”¹⁹ According to this analysis, each chronological or historical narrative is worth exploring, both individually and generally, regardless of the literary work into which it is placed. Levene has previously suggested that Aper’s redefinition of antiquity reveals fundamental continuities between Cicero’s age and Aper’s own historical moment.²⁰ However, I would go further by adding that Aper’s discourse about ages simultaneously constructs, on a micro-level, both a concise Greco-Roman oratorical history (16.5–17.1) and a political history spanning from Cicero’s death to contemporary Rome (17.2–17.3). These parallel narratives – mediated through his

¹⁷ Feeney 2007, pp. 14, 23

¹⁸ “*aetas*” emphasises human lifespans and delimited periods; “*aevum*” suggests eternity (*aeternitas*) while also denoting antiquity (*vetustas*); “*saeculum*” broadly indicates eras (Zeitalter), with specialised usage for imperial reigns or centuries; “*tempus*” operates as the most semantically flexible, marking specific moments, durations, or opportune occasions. See respective entries in the *Lexicon Taciteum*.

¹⁹ Levene 2004, p. 197.

²⁰ Levene 2004, p. 174.

reconfigured temporal frameworks – generate shifting experiential effects for both the internal audience and external reader.

Aper’s account of Greco–Roman oratorical history substantially condenses Cicero’s *Brutus*.²¹ Beyond textual parallels, I would emphasise the similarities and differences between their chronographic arrangements. Cicero’s *Brutus* explicitly acknowledges its debt to Atticus’s *Liber Annalis* for methodological inspiration regarding chronological and literary historiography (Cic. *Brut.* 15):

Ille uero et noua, inquam mihi quidem multa et eam utilitatem quam requirebam, ut explicatis ordinibus temporum uno in conspectu omnia uiderem.

“It truly provides many things that are new to me,” I replied, “and the kind of utility I was searching for—namely, by arranging the time order, I can see everything at a glance.”

As Cicero’s account suggests, the *Liber Annalis* appears to have presented Roman and Greek histories as distinct chronological sequences rather than as synchronistic parallels. This approach marked the departure from conventional practices of establishing synchronous parallels between Greece and Rome, which in turn inspired Cicero’s *Brutus*.²² The difference is that, whereas Atticus’s work was essentially a political and magisterial chronology born out of late Republican antiquarianism, Cicero repurposed this strict temporal framework to extract oratory as an independent historical discipline.²³ Even so, Cicero did not fully adhere to this separation. When his narrative in the *Brutus* momentarily reverts to traditional Greco–Roman syncrisis—juxtaposing Themistocles with Coriolanus (41)—Atticus explicitly critiques this framework (44). Notably, Aper’s brief oratorical survey adopts this differential chronographic approach. After dismissing the Greek tradition (16.5–16.7), he abruptly shifts to the Roman context with the programmatic transition, “I come now to the Romans” (*venio ad Romanos*, 17.1), thus clearly separating the Greek and Roman exempla and systematically avoiding all

²¹ Mayer 2001, p. 139.

²² Feeney 2007, pp. 20–28. This representational model – whereby Roman writers sought Greek analogues for Roman figures and events – effectively subordinated Roman history to Greek temporal frameworks, emphasising cultural dependency rather than autonomy and similarity rather than distinction. It is a dynamic which reinforced perceptions of Greek cultural superiority and Rome’s comparative immaturity, constituting a form of Roman Hellenisation.

²³ van der Blom 2018, pp. 252–253.

cross-cultural analogies. This strategic temporal arrangement serves his distinctive argumentative purposes, while simultaneously demonstrating the evolution of temporal narration which lies at the heart of his divergent treatment of the two eras. To be more specific, while his account of the Greeks spans a vast temporality, his Roman narrative—in which he abandons mythical distance in favour of a meticulous analysis of the late Republic and the immediate present—is grounded in historical “facts” (18.2).

Moreover, as the process of establishing temporal markers inherently involves both selection and exclusion, Aper’s chosen anchors in oratorical history reveal an underlying consciousness of historical periodisation. It is here that Aper’s rhetorical divergence from Cicero becomes evident. According to van der Blom, the historical *exempla* and chronological arrangement in Cicero’s rhetorical works focus on an idealised orator rather than specific historical contexts. This approach serves a teleological purpose, emphasising significant disjunctures and turning points to construct a developmental narrative of Roman eloquence that culminates in Cicero himself.²⁴ Aper’s historical survey, by contrast, deliberately accentuates continuity between eras to resist the narrative of post-Ciceronian decline. For instance, Cicero’s account of Greek oratory (26–51) traces a developmental arc beginning with Solon, Peisistratus, and Cleisthenes, and concluding with Demetrius Phalereus as the generation following Demosthenes (37), mentioning Homer only incidentally in later comments (40, 50). Aper, by contrast, commences with Homer and extends through to Demosthenes’s generation, strategically inserting temporal intervals between key figures to reinforce his argument that the past and present are bridged rather than severed. Even when discussing remote antiquity, Aper provides relatively precise chronological measurements to enhance the perceived continuity between past and present. This approach finds its parallel in his treatment of political history, during which Aper pointedly juxtaposes the era of Philip and Alexander (traditionally marking the end of the Classical age and advent of the Hellenistic period in Greek political/rhetorical historiography) with the contemporaneous period of Demosthenes and Hyperides.²⁵ By highlighting how the latter orators outlasted the former rulers’ brief epoch, he subverts conventional periodisation practices which treated the Macedonian

²⁴ van der Blom 2018, pp. 242–244, 246–249.

²⁵ Mayer 2001, p. 140.

conquest as a definitive rupture – further emphasising continuity. In this respect, Aper’s chronological strategy does more than resist narratives of decline; it also implicitly disputes what might be termed a “great-man” model of rhetorical history, in which eras are defined by the achievements of singular figures. Besides examples in *Brutus*, Cicero himself models this latter approach at *De Oratore* 3.7–8 as well, where the history of eloquence is presented as a list of outstanding Greek and Roman individuals from past to present, each defined by a single signature quality. In such catalogues, each figure epitomises an era, and the succession of eras is marked by the succession of exemplary talents. Aper, conversely, dissolves the exceptional into the continuous. The effect is to de-centre the individual “great man” as the engine of historical change, replacing a model of punctuated excellence with one of gradual evolution.

The Greek oratorical survey concludes with Demosthenes, a man who lived approximately 300 years before Aper’s time. Just as the audience is anticipating an example which might further bridge the temporal gap between antiquity and the present, Aper abruptly shifts their perceptual framework by employing the powerful rhetorical contrast between human time (measured by bodily frailty “*ad infirmitatem corporum*”) and cosmic/eternal time (or the essential nature of epochs “*naturam saeculorum*”):²⁶

quod spatium temporis si ad infirmitatem corporum nostrorum referas, fortasse longum videatur; si ad naturam saeculorum ac respectum immensi huius aevi, perquam breve et in proximo est. (16.6)

...which probably seems a long interval of time, if you assess by reference to the weakness of our bodies; if, however, you assess by reference to the nature of ages and respect of this immense eternity, it is extremely short and close at hand.

²⁶ Here, “*saeculum*” in the plural specifically carries the connotation of a long series of “centuries” (*Lexicon Taciteum*, s.v. *saeculum*, B). When this span is juxtaposed with *immensi huius aevi*, it can equally be understood as “a long or indefinite period” (*OLD*², s.v. *saeculum*, 9).

The shift from subjunctive to indicative mood underscores the argument’s universal validity and factual claim.²⁷ Aper then introduces the concept of the “Great Year” (*magnus annus*) to demonstrate the relative brevity of 300 years:

nam si, ut Cicero in Hortensio scribit, is est magnus et verus annus quo eadem positio caeli siderumque quae cum maxime est rursum existet, isque annus horum quos nos vocamus annorum duodecim milia nongentos quinquaginta quattuor complectitur, incipit Demosthenes [videtur], quem vos veterem et antiquum fingitis, non solum eodem anno quo nos sed †fama† eodem mense extitisse. (16.7)

For if, as Cicero writes in his *Hortensius*, the Great and True Year is that time when the same configuration of the heavens and stars returns to the exact position it holds at this very moment, and if that year encompasses 12,954 of what we call years, then it follows that Demosthenes, whom you make out to be so old and ancient, seems to have lived not merely in the same year as ourselves, but also in the same month.

The invocation of the “Great Year” stands as perhaps the most strained and unexpected argument in this passage. This concept, thoroughly expounded in Plato’s *Timaeus*,²⁸ was initially adopted by Cicero in his now-lost *Hortensius* before it was appropriated by Aper. By transposing finite historical time into the realm of infinite philosophical temporality,²⁹ this concept reconfigures the established structures of “objective” time units—like “year” and “month”—which are fixed, and typically unaffected by the passage of time itself, in order to deliberately disorientate the audience. This abrupt shift detaches listeners from the conventional progression of Greek oratorical history—which is organised around figures and dates—and confronts their historical assumptions with a radical challenge. Crucially, Aper strategically attributes this disruptive notion to Cicero, the very same “ancient” authority his interlocutors openly revere. Yet Aper’s logic contains inherent contradictions. While the “Great Year” framework may demonstrate that 300 years constitutes no true antiquity, by the same measure even 1300 years would fail to qualify. This paradox reflects the competing temporal measurements

²⁷ Mayer 2001, p. 140.

²⁸ “The complete year” (τὸν τέλεον ἐνιαυτὸν), Pl. *Ti.* 39d4.

²⁹ While historians work within the constraints of finite evidence and delimited temporal frameworks, philosophers engage with the concept of infinite time. See Momigliano 1966, p. 13.

which Aper simultaneously employs. That is to say, while the manipulation of these two units’ fundamental structures enables his intentional disorientation of the audience, it also inevitably ensnares his own argument in unresolved paradoxes.

With the presentation of this argument, we may well imagine Aper’s interlocutors being compelled to abandon conventional temporal frameworks; with them perhaps even attempting to anticipate any other sophistic reasonings which he might employ to bridge the gap between ancient Latin orators and the present. However, when the narrative turns to Roman oratorical history, listeners find Aper reverting to more readily comprehensible, and experientially accessible, temporal scales. Where his Greek survey employed transgenerational chronology, his Roman account emphasised historical immediacy, deliberately cultivating a sense of present connection.³⁰ This Latin oratorical history draws upon exempla which were far more familiar to his audience and equally central to their own arguments. Unlike the Greek narrative’s mythical origins, the Roman account begins with the historical consulship of Menenius Agrippa in 503 BCE. Subsequent figures cluster in the late Republic, beginning with Cicero and his contemporaries. Rather than emphasising chronological progression—as was done in the Greek section—the Roman narrative maintains tight temporal focus, advancing Aper’s core contention that Republican orators do not qualify as “ancient”.

Aper thus constructs his narrative around the pivotal era in which oratorical and political history became inextricably linked, the period which spanned from Cicero’s death to the Vespasianic principate. Through meticulously dated historical events supported by concrete evidence, he allows his audience to regain their historical placements:

nam ut de Cicerone ipso loquar, Hirtio nempe et Pansa consulibus, ut Tiro libertus eius scripsit, septimo idus <Decembres> occisus est, quo anno divus Augustus in locum Pansae et Hirti se et Q. Pedium consules suffecit. (17.2)

³⁰ Kraus noticed Aper’s flexible take on the past and the resulting tension between history and presence, pointing out the contradictions regarding time and distance. This approach, however, is more than just a flexible treatment of time and space; see Kraus 2014, pp. 221–224. A comparison between Greek and Latin oratorical history shows that the latter aligns more closely with the patterns employed by Tacitus in his historical works.

for, that I may speak about Cicero himself, it was indeed when Hirtius and Pansa were consuls, as Tiro his freedman writes, that he was killed on the seventh day before the Ides of December, in which year divine Augustus made himself and Q. Pedius consuls in the place of Pansa and Hirtius.

statue sex et quinquaginta annos, quibus mox divus Augustus rem publicam rexit; adice Tiberi tres et viginti, et prope quadriennium Gai, ac bis quaternos denos Claudii et Neronis annos, atque illum Galbae et Othonis et Vitelli longum et unum annum, ac sextam iam felicitis huius principatus stationem qua Vespasianus rem publicam fovet: centum et viginti anni ab interitu Ciceronis in hunc diem colliguntur, unius hominis aetas. (17.3)

set down 56 years, during which subsequently the divine Augustus guided the republic; add 23 of Tiberius and about four years of Gaius [Caligula], and twice fourteen years of Claudius and Nero, and that notorious long and single year of Galba, Otho and Vitellius, and now the sixth stations of this fortunate principate in which Vespasian supports the republic:³¹ One hundred and twenty years are computed from Cicero’s death to this day—the lifespan of one man.

This narrative simultaneously presents three narratorial voices: Tiro’s, Cicero’s freedman who recorded the death of his former master; Aper’s, as he recounts these events from the Vespasianic present; and Tacitus’s, the historian who frames the entire *Dialogus*. Aper’s account strategically links two pivotal historical transitions by noting how Cicero’s death was contemporaneous with Octavian’s rise to consular power in 43 BCE. This was the same year in which Hirtius and Pansa both fell at Mutina – a seminal moment that enabled Octavian’s ascent to power and his later dominance within the Second Triumvirate. This political shift caused Cicero’s proscription and execution, implicitly marking the simultaneous collapse of the Republic, the erosion of political liberty, and the

³¹ The term “*statio*” here denotes individual years within a reign (*OLD*² s.v. *statio*, 5a), a usage likely derived from the annual military oath (*sacramentum*) which reaffirmed imperial authority. In the context of the Principate, the term was frequently employed to describe the “office” of the princeps, originating from a series of Augustan constructions. Woodman 1977, p. 222 on Vell. Pat. 2.124.2 (*stationi paternae succederet*) had noted its connotation of “permanency” and argued that the usage at *Dial.* 17.3 inherits a similar sense. Cooley 2019, pp. 73–84 also demonstrates its military connotations of guard duty, and analyses the creation and development of its meaning under Augustus and his later successions.

demise of Rome’s most canonical orator.³² In compressing a literary history and a political chronicle into a tightly interwoven sequence, Aper employs a technique that finds a close parallel in Tacitus’s own historiographical practice. The opening of the *Annals* (1.1.1–2) similarly juxtaposes a sequence of constitutional changes—from kingship through the Republic and civil wars to the Augustan settlement—with a brief history of historical writing itself.³³ While Tacitus avoids a systematic investigation into the transition between Cicero’s death and Augustus’s consolidation of power in *Dialogus*, his authorial persona remains consistent across the *Annals* (1.2–4) and *Histories* (1.1), in which he elucidates the underlying mechanisms of Augustan authority.³⁴ Significantly, Aper refers to the young Caesar on both occasions as *divus Augustus*—a title conferred only after his death and deification in AD 14. This retrospective naming creates a doubled temporal perspective in which the speaker’s Vespasianic present colours the narrated past. Aper’s subsequent enumeration of imperial reigns, with each name representing another political era, advances the chronology without requiring individual commentary. The “long single year” of 69 CE (*longum et unum annum*)—so termed due to the rapid succession of 4 different emperors—forms the central subject of Tacitus’s *Histories* Books 1–2. Aper’s characterisation of Vespasian’s reign as “fortunate” (*felicis*) further echoes Tacitus’s description of the Nervan–Trajanic era in the preface (*temporum felicitate*, *Hist.* 1.1.4), creating an intertextual resonance which reinforces the *Dialogus*’s connection to Tacitus’s broader historical works.

³² O’Gorman 2026, p. 142 suggests that reading from “the experiential perspective of the emperor’s subjects” can recover a sense of Augustan power as open-ended and subject to time rather than teleologically fixed. Aper’s narration of the transition from Cicero to Augustus operates within a similar temporal horizon.

³³ To these may be added another significant instance, namely the phrase “mid–Augustan period” appearing twice in the *Dialogus*: first when Aper notes Corvinus’s survival into *medium usque Augusti principatum* (17.6), then when Maternus compares Pollio’s centumviral oratory during *mediis divi Augusti temporibus* (38.2) with ancient eloquence. Both men embodied Republican values – Corvinus trained alongside Cicero, while Pollio maintained neutrality at Actium and distance from Augustus’s regime. This periodisation aligns with Tacitus’s historiographical criteria: his praise for histories combining *eloquentia ac libertate* (*Hist.* 1.1), and Wang’s analysis of how the *Annals* prologue (1.2) locates the decline of historical writing (marked by *inscitia rei publicae ut alienae* and diminishing talent) precisely in the mid–Augustan era. See Wang 2025, pp. 80–82, where he demonstrated the synchronicity between the *Histories* and *Annals* prologues.

³⁴ Cf. ten Berge 2023, p. 153, who reads Aper’s omission of Octavian’s role in Cicero’s proscription as a deliberate, “Velleius-esque” sanitisation of the emperor’s early record and concealment of oratory’s violent nature.

How then are we to conceptualise this span of 120 years? As previously established, Aper’s approach differs from his treatment of the 300-year Greek chronology, deliberately cultivating a present experience from the past, inextricably linking the two. Rather than dwelling on potential chronological discrepancies,³⁵ the “single human lifespan” (*unius hominis aetas*) framework remains rhetorically effective for any period under 120 years. To make this extended, yet fundamentally human-scale, framework of temporality tangible for his contemporaries, Aper strategically directs his audience’s attention to surviving eyewitnesses before invoking their lived experiences:

nam ipse ego in Britannia vidi senem, qui se fateretur ei pugnae interfuisse qua Caesarem inferentem arma Britanni arcere litoribus et pellere adgressi sunt. ita si eum, qui armatus C. Caesari restitit, vel captivitas vel voluntas vel fatum aliquod in urbem pertraxisset, aequae idem et Caesarem ipsum et Ciceronem audire potuit et nostris quoque actionibus interesse. (17.4)

For example, I myself in Britain saw an old man, who admitted he had participated in that battle, in which the Britons attempted to prevent Caesar from war, from the shores and drive him away. Thus, if captivity or choice or some fate had drawn him to Rome—that same man who stood armed against Gaius Caesar—he could equally have heard both Caesar himself and Cicero, and even could participate in our legal proceedings.

proximo quidem congiario ipsi vidistis plerosque senes qui se a divo quoque Augusto semel atque iterum accepisse congiarium narrabant. ex quo colligi potest et Corvinum ab illis et Asinium audiri potuisse—nam Corvinus in medium usque Augusti principatum, Asinius paene ad extremum duravit: ne dividatis saeculum et antiquos ac veteres vocitetis oratores quos eorundem hominum aures adgnosceret ac velut coniungere et copulare potuerunt. (17.5-6)

Indeed, at the most recent distribution of imperial bounty (*congiarium*), you yourselves saw many old men who recounted having received gifts from the deified Augustus—once and then again. From which it can be deduced that both Corvinus and Asinius could have been heard by those men. For Corvinus lasted until the middle of Augustus’s principate, Asinius almost to its end—lest you divide the age and call “ancient and old” those orators whom the ears of the same men could recognise and, as it were, join and connect.

³⁵ Augustus’s 56-year reign actually yields 118 years total, here rounded to 120 years, the conventional lifespan (*aetas*).

Aper repeatedly emphasises the evidentiary primacy of eyewitness observation (*videre*) and auditory experience (*audire*), blending verifiable present realities with counterfactual scenarios (*ita si*). This rhetorical fusion enables his audience to reconcile direct experience with the imaginative reconstruction of historical possibilities, thereby collapsing perceived temporal divisions into a unified epoch. By deliberately omitting transformative historical ruptures, he constructs a chronologically continuous age defined equally by numerical duration and lived experience(s). Thus, the listeners inhabit an expanded present where multiple historical layers remain simultaneously accessible. This strategy effectively neutralised the teleological tendencies of his retrospective historical account. Notably, this passage can also be read against the opening of the *Annals*. Aper’s examples seem to answer the question posed at *Annals* 1.3—How few survivors there were who had seen the republic (*quotus quisque reliquus qui rem publicam vidisset*)—but with an ironic effect: the old man who might have seen Caesar is placed not in Rome but on a distant frontier; and even Messalla Corvinus and Asinius Pollio, born amid civil war, did not truly see the Republic according to the logic of *Annals* 1.3—let alone the old men who received the *congiarium*.³⁶ The appeal to *vidisti* and *audire* also recalls the *qui ipsi viderant* (those who had seen it themselves) and *quique a parentibus acceperant* (and those who had received from their parents) of *Annals* 1.8, where hearers caught the end of the Caesarian age, while here they hear the end of Republican oratory. This intertextual resonance extends to the account of Augustus’s funeral that immediately follows (*Ann.* 1.9–10), where Tacitus’s tripartite classification of the spectators retrospectively illuminates Aper’s own position.³⁷

Here emerges another fundamental contradiction in Aper’s methodology. Having previously substituted the “fragility of the body” (*infirmiorem corporum*) with the cosmic “nature of the ages” (*naturam saeculorum*), he now reinstates the very human-scale measurement which he initially displaced. This shift re-anchors the

³⁶ On the compilation of Republican orators and the periodisation challenges regarding Asinius Pollio and Messalla Corvinus, see van der Blom 2017, pp. 235–238; See also van den Berg 2014, pp. 199, 264–265, who notes that Aper constructs an “acoustic community” to bridge the two eras; by emphasising that living audiences have heard both late Republican figures and contemporary speakers, Aper highlights an unbroken continuity of listeners that drives rhetorical change, a conceptual framing that echoes the generational links in Cicero’s *Brutus*.

³⁷ Here, as ten Berge notes, Tacitus’s tripartite classification of the funeral’s spectators at *Ann.* 1.9–10—the credulous majority, the observant minority who uncritically endorse imperial reconstructions, and those who discern the real causes and motivations behind official versions—and Aper’s account places him squarely among the second group. See ten Berge 2023, pp. 154–155.

audience into a lived and perceivable present. The irony is compounded when his exhortation against periodisation (*ne dividatis saeculum*) follows his own meticulous segmentation of imperial history. He does not accidentally create inconsistency within his argument; instead, it is the deliberate manifestation of competing temporal frameworks present within his rhetoric. Besides an assertion of continuity from the late Republican to contemporary time, Aper’s argument performs an intrinsic competition of temporal layers.³⁸ As we have seen, Aper’s definition of antiquity moves between irreconcilable temporal frameworks: the vast *magnus annus* that compresses three centuries into a single year (16.7), the annalistic precision of imperial reigns (17.3), and the embodied temporality of eyewitness memory (17.4–6). By doing so, he shatters the expectations of his listeners, forcing them to extricate themselves from a linear narrative and engage with a pluralistic historical experience.

Aper’s use of a human lifespan (*aetas*) as his temporal measure resonates with Tacitus’s own historiographical method. This connection finds concrete evidence in *Annals* 11.11, where Tacitus invokes his status as a member of the Board of Fifteen for Performing Sacrifices (*quindecimviri sacris faciundis*) during Domitian’s reign. He also employs this sacerdotal credential to authenticate his account of Claudius’s Secular Games (*ludi saeculares*). These games—restored by Augustus as part of his traditional revival and then by Claudius—were designed to demarcate the transition between *saecula* with the cultural expectation that a Roman would witness only one such celebration in their lifetime.³⁹ Suetonius’s critique of Claudius’s irregular timing employs a similar logic; defining the games as uniquely generational events (*quos nec spectasset quisquam nec spectaturus esset*, Suet. *Claud.*

³⁸ The notion that connecting long-term developments with single political events is reductive has been productively explored by ten Berge 2023, pp. 151–154, who argues that Tacitus’s deliberate ambiguity about the ancient–modern division serves both as a strategy of safe criticism of imperial ideology and as a methodological statement against artificial chronological boundaries.

³⁹ Although a saeculum was never formally defined as 120 years in the tradition of the *ludi saeculares*, such a connection can plausibly be drawn. The concept of the saeculum was intrinsically linked to the extreme limit of a human life (*OLD*², s.v. saeculum, 6; Censorinus, *DN* 17.1), and the *ludi saeculares* were “usually held once in a person’s lifetime” (*quod plerumque semel fiant hominis aetate*, Censorinus, *DN* 17.13). Moreover, 120 years does appear as a possible human lifespan (*hominis aetas*) in some ancient testimonia; see Pliny, *NH* 7.160, and the examples adduced in Censorinus, *DN* 17.4 and 17.14, where the maximum human life can be given as 100, 112, 116, or 120 years. On the two actual periodicities observed from Augustus onward – a 100-year cycle connected with the centenary of the city’s foundation, and a 110-year cycle – see the corresponding entries in *OCD* (Taylor and Price 2017, Dunning 2017) and the recent discussions by Dunning 2020. As Dunning 2022 has shown, in the later Empire the saeculum also increasingly became a form of political rhetoric detached from the actual celebration of the *ludi saeculares*.

21) and citing surviving witnesses and actors from Augustus’s celebration as living benchmarks of chronological continuity.⁴⁰

Aper’s second speech employs a multifaceted temporal rhetoric to define historical epochs, interweaving singular events, enduring structures, and vast chronological scales. This synthesis creates layered temporalities in order to foster an open-ended historical consciousness among his audience. Within this interpretive framework, the apparent contradictions in his argument reflect the inherent tensions and discontinuities generated by shifting between competing temporal registers. Such deliberate chronological transitions continually disrupt listeners’ expectations, producing significant interruptions in their temporal perception and understanding. Moreover, Tacitus’s multiple roles—as internal audience, redactor, and external historian—profoundly shape the dialogue’s temporal rhetoric, particularly evident in Aper’s definition of historical periods. Having examined these micro-level temporal stratifications, the following analysis will broaden its scope to examine the temporal layers which manifest throughout the entire *Dialogus*.

3. The Temporal Rhetoric of Different Interlocutors in *Dialogus*

Aper’s dynamic definitions of historical epochs and temporal rhetoric embody his own subsequent argument that “the forms and styles of speech change with the times” (*mutari cum temporibus formas quoque et genera dicendi*, 18.2) and that “eloquence has no single appearance” (*non esse unum eloquentiae vultum*, 18.3). This stylistic relativism is a response to the political realities of the Principate.⁴¹ With the restriction of traditional political arenas, imperial oratory shifted its focus from political efficacy to aesthetic and stylistic display. By insisting on stylistic evolution, Aper demands that contemporary eloquence be judged by the cultural conditions of its own era.

His argument transcends a simple reversal of the traditional decline narrative, instead urging his audience to acknowledge the inherent differences between eras and their respective oratorical traditions, paying particular

⁴⁰ Pliny the Elder records the same phenomenon (Plin. *HN* 7.159) and identifies one of the performers by name (Stephanio).

⁴¹ van der Blom 2017, p. 238.

attention to the critique of antiquarian biases and their idealised views of ancient eloquence (21.1–23.4). The speech culminates in a direct appeal to his listeners: “Illuminate our age with the most splendid style of oratory” (*inlustrate saeculum nostrum pulcherrimo genere dicendi*, 23.5), assuring them that “though malice and envy may delay judgment of our generation, posterity will declare the truth about you” (*si nostra iudicia malignitas et invidia tardaverit, verum de vobis dicturi sint posteri nostri*, 23.6). This future—oriented conclusion marks Aper’s final substantive contribution to the dialogue. His rhetorical strategy exemplifies Lorenz’s observation that historical periodisation is never a neutral measurement, but an artificial taxonomy often laden with teleology and cultural hegemony.⁴² While traditionalists use ancient vs. modern boundaries to delegitimise contemporary speakers (like Messalla, mentioned in 15.1), Aper capitalises on the chronological ambiguity of transitional figures and collapses the boundary between the late Republic and the Principate. In doing so, he effectively deconstructs this standard, refusing to relegate imperial oratory to a mere appendage of a traditional decline narrative.

Following Aper’s oration, the responses of Maternus and Messalla—the internal audience within the text—directly articulate their reception of his arguments. Maternus acknowledges Aper’s “comprehensive and varied” rhetoric yet simultaneously frames it through teleological and oppositional lenses; claiming that by “defending our age while attacking the ancients” (*saeculum nostrum defendit...vexavit antiquos*, 24.1) Aper is “adopting the contrarian position” (*sumpsit sibi contra dicendi partis*, 24.3). Turning to Messalla, Maternus then requests an explanation for “why we have declined so far from their eloquence” (*causas cur in tantum ab eloquentia eorum recesserimus*), accepting only the numerical span of 120 years since Cicero’s death while disregarding its conceptual implications made by Aper. Rather than immediately complying with the request, Messalla responds first to Aper’s speech in two parts (25.1–26.8). In a similar fashion to Maternus, Messalla addresses the definition of “antiquity” (25.1–2) before rebutting the critique of ancient orators (25.3–26.8) in a structure framed by nominal references, opening with “the controversy over names” (*nominis controversia*) and closing with “to name” (*nominare*). In the former part, Messalla makes note of the contested nature of Aper’s definition while

⁴² Lorenz 2017, pp. 109–131.

declining to counter it, equally avoiding dispute over the diversity of oratorical styles across periods. From Goldberg’s perspective, Aper’s “sophistic” definition reflects his rejection of canonical answers, thereby upholding his view of stylistic evolution across ages.⁴³ Yet, through the lens of temporal rhetoric and audience reception, Messalla’s non-response merits closer examination. While superficially dismissive of Aper’s terminological play, his silence implicitly acknowledges the validity of Aper’s argument regarding stylistic variation, contradicting Maternus’ reductive characterisation of it as mere oppositional sophistry. It is a linkage which Messalla’s subsequent argument accommodated in his analysis of literary influence and affinity.⁴⁴ Crucially, as previously established, Aper’s framework resists teleology and linear historiography; positions which are fundamentally incompatible with Messalla’s ensuing narrative of progressive decline. This tension explains Messalla’s selective rebuttal. He systematically challenges Aper’s criticisms of ancient orators while avoiding direct engagement with his temporal or stylistic theories, as any engagement would undermine his own linear historical model.

The temporal concepts articulated by Messalla and Maternus directly address the *Dialogus*’s fundamental question regarding the decline of oratory. If we interpret Tacitus’s primary purpose as a response to Fabius’s initial query, then the second speeches of Messalla and Maternus—which both engage directly with this issue—and particularly Maternus’ concluding arguments, naturally warrant greater attention. However, by moving beyond such teleological readings and acknowledging the dynamic temporal rhetoric embodied within Aper’s arguments, we may instead reconsider how the three principal interlocutors’ competing temporal frameworks interact within the text and explore connections between the *Dialogus* and Tacitus’s other works. This approach promises deeper insights into the dialogue’s complexities.

Messalla’s arguments stand in direct opposition to Aper’s perspective. In chapters 28–31, he attributes the decline of oratory to deteriorating educational practices through systematic contrasts between ancient and contemporary pedagogy. To strengthen this assertion in 33.4–35, he traces how rhetorical training evolved from

⁴³ Goldberg 1999, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Levene 2004, p. 182.

practical skill to empty formalism, identifying Cicero’s era as the pivotal point of transition. This periodisation reflects the simplified and idealised historical schema which—as demonstrated by Syson—turns figurative complaints about stylistic corruption into a narrative of changes in childrearing and pedagogy. The period’s ills are presented through a lexical emphasis on *natura* and birth, anchoring transhistorical anxieties about rhetorical artifice in the physical reality of his own generation.⁴⁵ Through an intertextual examination, we can find many parallel yet contrasting examples in the *Agricola* and the *Germania*, especially in Tacitus’s emphases on the influence of childhood environment and education on physical and mental development.⁴⁶ The fragmented text beyond chapter 35 permits only the partial reconstruction of Messalla’s narrative arc and may prevent full assessment of his audiences’ reception. Nevertheless, his linear declension model—with its reductive dualism of past and present—consciously opposes Aper’s multivocal temporal rhetoric, suggesting a deliberate construction of competing historical frameworks by Tacitus. In fact, this moralising narrative of progressive decay perpetuates a conventional historiographic trope which appeared during the late Republic.⁴⁷

Maternus develops an alternative moral decline narrative which ultimately shifts towards constitutional and political reflection. Rather than engaging with the much-discussed links between oratory’s decline and the rise of the Principate, or the differing climates of free speech, we turn our attention to the temporal framework he employs.⁴⁸ As early as his defence of poetry in Chapter 12, he introduces his “Golden Age” (*aureum saeculum*) framework, portraying poetry as embodying that age’s moral purity and sacred character, while contemporary oratory’s utilitarian worldliness reflects linguistic and ethical decay.⁴⁹ In his final speech (36.1–41.5), Maternus

⁴⁵ Syson 2009, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Cf. ten Berge 2023, pp. 156–158, 164–170, where he analyses the intertextual engagements in these works based on the notion that the qualities of parents/guardians are passed down to their children.

⁴⁷ Earl 1961, pp. 41–59; for example, Sallust’s theme that the decline of civic virtue was the root cause of Rome’s decline. Hay 2023, pp. 70–82 further categorises its temporal frameworks into three variants: an undefined sense of contemporary inferiority, a “lapsarian” model pinpointing a specific historical moment of degeneration, and more complex periodised narratives of decline.

⁴⁸ On this topic, see the recent study by ten Berge 2023, pp. 170–191; notably, Maternus’ treatment of the Republic and the Principate finds parallel formulations in the *Agricola* and *Germania*.

⁴⁹ Heilmann 1989, p. 390 identifies the schema’s capacity to transcend history and represent universal human development („auf die Entwicklung der Menschheit“) and the time of origins („der Zeit des Ursprungs“); and Syson 2009, pp. 72–73 builds on this insight to underscore the commemorative power of poetry as a vehicle for transhistorical cultural memory.

politicises this Golden Age imagery, depicting Vespasian’s reign as a renewed period of innocence. Although similarly presenting a gradual decline from this idealised past, Maternus’ model differs from Messalla’s linear moral decay in two key aspects. Firstly, beyond their divergent explanations for decline, the Golden Age narrative inherently encompasses the cyclical, restorative potential held within Roman tradition(s)—particularly in imperial propaganda since Augustus, where effective governance could restore Saturn’s *aureum saeculum*.⁵⁰ And secondly, unlike Messalla’s uniformly negative assessment, Maternus offers a political justification for the present state of things, using Golden Age imagery to suggest possibilities for renewal. Beyond this, the temporal layers in Maternus’ discourse contain two additional aspects worthy of note. First, when describing the formal comparison between ancient and contemporary court speeches, Maternus employs vivid narration and narrows the temporal scale even further, to the level of hours (38.1), as a parallel to his earlier contrast between the immediacy of oratory and the eternity of poetry. As his speech approaches its conclusion, Maternus puts forth a hypothesis regarding the transformation of eras:

si aut vos prioribus saeculis aut illi, quos miramur, his nati essent, ac deus aliquis vitas ac [vestra] tempora repente mutasset, nec vobis summa illa laus et gloria in eloquentia neque illis modus et temperamentum defuisset: (41.5)

if you were born in earlier ages, or those orators we admire have been born in those ages, and if some god suddenly changed your lives and times—neither would you have lacked that supreme praise and glory for eloquence, nor would they have been wanting in moderation and restraint.

Whereas Aper earlier invoked Cicero’s authority to posit the “Great Year” hypothesis (*si*)—thus enabling his audience to perceive continuity across ages and thereby bridge past and present—Maternus concludes by poetically evoking a *deus ex machina* which “suddenly transformed” (*repente mutasset*) his listeners’ lived temporal reality. These contrasting approaches offer distinct modes of historical experience, in which one can

⁵⁰ Zanker’s work provides the most comprehensive demonstration of the “return of the Golden Age” as a central motif in Augustan propaganda (Zanker 1988, pp. 167–172). Building upon this foundation, Barker’s analysis further examined the inherent complexities of the Golden Age concept itself, challenging reductive interpretations which view it as an unequivocally positive ideal. See Barker 1993, pp. 434–446.

live the past as the present; Aper collapses temporal distance by arguing that the present is coevality bound to the past, while Maternus facilitates imaginative exchange with the ancients.

In 2019, Geue identified the pervasive themes of repetition and habit throughout the *Dialogus*. The ambiguity of its authorship and date thus serves this theme of universality and continuity.⁵¹ Yet, I would argue that the question of authorship cannot simply be dissolved into silence. Moreover, beyond these repetitive patterns, the text reveals additional layers of temporal rhetoric in dynamic interplay. Even within Koselleck’s framework, a recursive and repetitive temporal stratum constitutes only one aspect. First, each interlocutor employs chronologies which transcend both conventional historicity and lived experiences. While Maternus’ “Golden Age” constructs a transhistorical moral paradigm, Messalla’s linear decline narrative spans centuries of educational transformation, and Aper’s “Great Year” invokes cosmic temporality. These frameworks exist in constant tension. Maternus’s cyclical model—with its potential for restoration—directly opposes Messalla’s unidirectional decline, while Aper’s chronological dissolution destabilises the very antique–modern dichotomy upon which both his opponents rely. Second, their strategies for shaping historical consciousness are equally divergent. Maternus emphasises the particularity of ages by the assumption of divine intervention, Messalla reifies historical ruptures through educational decline, while Aper’s generational metrics manufacture experiential continuity. Furthermore, Aper deliberately uses lifespan—based measurements to blur such distinctions, allowing the audience to perceive the continuity between ancient and modern ages through the lens of their own personal experience(s). This competitive construction of temporal experience ensures that the historical consciousness of the *Dialogus* remains perpetually in a state of dynamic tension. Through the character of Aper, Tacitus responds to two dominant conceptions of time which had prevailed since the late Republic, the linear time of moral decline and the cyclical time of the Golden Age’s return. Cicero’s dual presence as both ancient authority and contemporary reference further intensifies this *agōn*. By staging these competing periodisation practices, Tacitus reveals the extent to which Roman oratorical history was built upon artificial rhetoric from various stances. This approach functions as a meta-historical critique of the periodisation frameworks prevalent

⁵¹ Geue 2019, pp. 235–254.

in his era.⁵² Furthermore, the dialogue’s open-ended conclusion, with its deferred discussion and anticipatory promise, ultimately mirrors the unresolved temporal tensions which animate the entire work.

The interplay of these competing temporalities does not merely serve the rhetorical needs of the individual speakers in *Dialogus*; rather, it reflects a broader structural complexity inherent in Tacitus’s own historiographical vision. Maternus’ narrative of gradual decline from a Golden Age finds parallels in the *Annals* and *Histories*, reflecting Tacitus’s perspective on Roman historical development(s).⁵³ However, a focus on temporal layers and reception reveals more multifaceted connections beyond decline motifs in the interactions between the *Dialogus* and Tacitus’s other works. From Tacitus’s narratorial perspective, there are three interacting temporal layers: 1) the composition date (c. 100–102 CE); 2) the dramatic date (74–75 CE); and 3) the historical periods cited within the dialogue.⁵⁴ Corresponding reception strata thus emerge among a) the dedicatee, Fabius; b) contemporary/future readers; and c) the internal audience. The internal audience of the *Dialogus* and its external readers are thus required to continually reflect upon the problem of the “decline of oratory” across these temporal backgrounds. The *Agricola*’s preface manifests similar concerns about time, visible through the narration of Agricola’s Republican virtues (past), the Domitianic context (intermediate past), the Trajanic composition (present), and the act of transmitting to posterity (futura).⁵⁵ Notably, some specific temporal expressions

⁵² As Esposito reiterates in his analysis of Koselleck’s theoretical objectives, periodisation is inherently a form of “chronopolitics”. Koselleck’s periodisation of modernity was intended to facilitate the establishment of a self-reflective historicism. See Esposito 2025, pp. 329–331.

⁵³ Cf. *Annals* 3.26–28 on moral decline and legal complexity; *Histories* 3.72, 4.53 on the Capitol fire and restoration. Heilmann analysed this as demonstrating Tacitus’s views that: 1) no era exists as purely good or bad, but rather as better/worse relative to others; 2) imperial governance, though repeatedly threatened, maintains persistent viability. See Heilmann 1989, pp. 391–395. Vassiliades further interpreted all three speakers in the *Dialogus* as engaging in decline discourse, suggesting that the text and Tacitus’s two histories collectively constitute a meta-reflection on this theme; see Vassiliades 2021, pp. 351–358, where Aper’s anti-decline rhetoric contrasts with Messalla’s monolithic declinism, while Maternus’ arguments parallel *Annals* 3.55’s nuanced treatment of luxury’s historical progression.

⁵⁴ In his analysis of the overall narrative structure of the *Dialogus*, Whitton points out that the work itself exhibits “blurred temporalities”, since it straddles both the dramatic date and the time of narration/composition, perpetuating the question of the “decline of oratory”; see Whitton 2012, p. 358; ten Berge 2023, p. 126. A similar phenomenon occurs in the *Agricola*; see Woodman and Kraus 2014, pp. 18–19. Indeed, these dimensions are deeply tied to the generic choices of the *Dialogus*, specifically its affinity with the Ciceronian dialogue form. On historical periodisation in Cicero’s dialogues, see van der Blom 2018, pp. 240–249.

⁵⁵ Stöckinger identified this tripartite temporal patterning: the distant past, the recent past, and the future-oriented present, as characteristic of the ancient biography’s treatment of cultural–historical distance. See Stöckinger 2024, pp. 152–154.

provide concrete examples of the conceptual interplay between the *Dialogus* and Tacitus’s historical works. While a full-scale comparative analysis lies beyond the immediate scope of this study, these specific temporal focuses suggest a promising avenue for further research into Tacitus’s evolving historical method.⁵⁶

4. Conclusion

The interlocutors’ competition over temporal frameworks and narrative experience concludes as “the day had now been spent” (*iam dies esset exactus*, 42.1). The participants defer further discussion to an uncertain future, leaving the *Dialogus* as a dialogue about time in which time itself is the ultimate victor. The diverse temporal frameworks analysed throughout this study reveal that the *Dialogus* functions as a sophisticated site of temporal competition, wherein historical experience is constantly being reshaped through rhetoric. From Aper’s radical collapse of antiquity to Messalla’s linear moral decline, and Maternus’ restorative Golden Age, the interlocutors’ competing chronologies are an attempt to legitimise their own respective visions of the present. As established in the methodological framework of this paper, time is not a neutral backdrop but a strategic instrument of persuasion. From this perspective, Aper’s role is particularly transformative. By wielding his modified temporal metrics, he does not merely offer a chronological correction but fundamentally destabilises the very categories of “ancient” and “modern”. Tacitus did not provide an objective division of epochs; instead, he allowed Aper, Messalla, and Maternus to contend with each other using their respective temporal frameworks—continuity, linear decline, and cyclical renewal—as rhetorical weapons. This demonstrates that *Dialogus* is not merely a rhetorical treatise but also a text that explores how historical consciousness is constructed through discourse.

Weaving together these micro-level rhetorical strategies with the macro-level historiographical concerns of his broader corpus reveals that Tacitus is engaged in two simultaneous dialogues. First, he interacts with Cicero’s

⁵⁶ For a detailed intertextual analysis of how the *Dialogus* interacts with the *Agricola* and the *Germania* (and, by extension, with the *Historiae* and *Annales*), see ten Berge 2023, pp. 118–210. His conclusions are distinct from those offered here, but his approach to cross-generic reading within the Tacitean corpus provides an important complementary perspective.

foundational tradition of philosophical dialogue to assert his own distinctive historiographical voice;⁵⁷ second, as an Antonine author, he converses across time with his younger Flavian self and his oratorical predecessors about the political history of rhetoric. Through the dynamic interplay within a single speech and amongst different interlocutors, Tacitus ensures that historical consciousness remains in a state of productive tension. From this perspective, the *Dialogus* offers a window into the resonances between Tacitus’s rhetorical and non-rhetorical works, revealing an intertextual dialogue between his writings which transcends generic boundaries. As the silent auditor and redactor of these dialogues and debates, Tacitus makes his powerful statement precisely through his silence.

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⁵⁷ On Tacitus’s interaction with the Ciceronian tradition, see a detailed discussion in Keeline 2018, pp. 223–276.

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