

SURVIVAL AND MEMORY IN THE *AGRICOLA*

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Roman historiography makes a strong connection between memory and history. For the Roman historian, the events of history prompted *memoria*, a narrative of the past that could be handed down to posterity and kept alive in memory.¹ Knowledge of the past involved honoring its memory in writing; it did not wholly comprise what contemporary historians value as objective documentary research.² To the extent that individual recollections were shared, *memoria* became a collective and cultural memory that could be called a truth of a different order than the rigorous unearthing of facts.³ *Memoria* itself was a legitimate way of preserving history, and the historian played the important role of sustaining that memory. Tacitus reports that the historian Cremutius Cordus, tried for having published a history in which he praised Brutus and called Cassius the “last of the Romans” (*Ann.* 4.33.1), delivers a speech before the senate in which he declares both that historians preserve the memory of the dead as statues do, and that because of this trial, he himself will become an object of memory as well: “suum cuique decus posteritas rependit; nec deerunt, si damnatio ingruit, qui non modo Cassii et Bruti, set etiam mei meminerint” (“To each man, posterity returns his own honor; nor will there be lacking, if condemnation threatens, those who will remember not only Cassius and Brutus, but also myself,” 4.35.4).

Cremutius, sure of receiving a guilty sentence, then starved himself to death. His story resounds particularly in connection with Tacitus’s own

1 As Gowing 2005.9 reminds us, Tacitus’s history, Lucan’s epic poem, and Pliny’s letters, all count as *memoria*. On the connection between speech and *memoria*, and their “central[ity] to the Roman practice of historiography,” see Hedrick 2000.141.

2 See Woodman 1988 for the definitive study of the rhetorical practice of ancient historiography.

3 Cf. LaCapra 2001.13 n. 14, particularly his criticism of Hayden White’s identification of narrativization with fictionalization.

literary and political lives, which were roughly divided from one another by the tyrannical reign of Domitian. Under the latter, he was a political man who received advancement, as he openly admits at the beginning of the *Histories*. But freedom of speech and writing was grossly curtailed; the stakes, a death sentence. After Domitian was assassinated, however, he was free to write about politics and history as well as engage in political life. As he tells us at the beginning both of the *Agricola* and the *Histories*, the eras of Nerva and Trajan were more sympathetic to *libertas* (*Agr.* 3.1, *Hist.* 1.4).

The *Agricola*, one of Tacitus's earliest texts, treats directly the earlier repression of speech and celebrates the opportunity represented by the new regime.⁴ It represents his coming to terms with the effects of the previous terror and the beginning of his ability to speak again. But the tone the *Agricola* strikes is more somber than celebratory. It contains little in the vein of Pliny's *Panegyricus*. Such a somber tone is fitting for a text that reads partly as a funeral oration (like the one Tacitus delivered at the funeral of Verginius Rufus around the time of the writing of the *Agricola*, *Pliny Epist.* 2.1.6). Yet Tacitus not only writes eloquently of Agricola but also passionately about himself and his own experiences during the Domitianic regime. This text, often read as a eulogistic account of Agricola's martial excellence in Britain and quietism in the face of Domitian's jealousy, begins and ends on a note of guilt and bitterness at Tacitus's own role under the tyrant, and leaves the reader with a strong impression of the cost to himself and his peers of having survived him.⁵ On the one hand, unlike Agricola, Tacitus lived to see the beginning of better times. On the other, the trauma he and others witnessed left an indelible mark.

4 On the dating of the *Agricola* and *Germania*, see Ogilvie and Richmond 1978.10–11.

5 I am indebted to David Levene for pointing out to me the desirability of distinguishing between guilt in the sense of moral responsibility for a crime and psychological awareness of moral responsibility for that crime. The latter is a culturally determined emotion, and I would not wish to argue for Tacitus's psychological state based purely on a contemporary definition of it. However, as I argue below, Tacitus almost never expresses himself in such personal terms, with such a degree of emotion, anywhere else in his work. The *Agricola* is a struggle to provide a satisfactory account of good behavior in a bad regime where several conflicting definitions of "good" compete. This struggle is mirrored in Tacitus's emotional and conflicted rhetoric, which bears a striking resemblance to contemporary narratives by Holocaust and Stalinist survivors (on language and historical accuracy in Holocaust narratives, see, particularly, Friedländer 2001.271–78, LaCapra 1994). For this reason, I think we can say that Tacitus expresses "guilt" in the sense that we understand it today. Cf. also Ogilvie and Richmond's interpretation of *Agr.* 2.1 and 45.1 as representing "Tacitus's sense of guilt in respect of the members of [the philosophical circle of Pactus]" (1978.7 n. 3).

Tacitus specifically refers to the work he intends to undertake after the *Agricola* as a *memoria*: “non tamen pigebit vel incondita ac rudi voce memoriam prioris servitutis ac testimonium praesentium bonorum composuisse” (“Nevertheless, I shall not regret having set out the memory of our former slavery and the evidence of our present good fortunes, even if only in an unformed and rough voice,” 3.2).⁶ The account of the present good he never did accomplish, though the opening of the *Historiae* attests to his intention to write about it if he lives long enough. The *memoria prioris servitutis* is fulfilled by the part of the *Historiae* we no longer have—the reign of Domitian and Tacitus’s own role within it. Perhaps in a more general sense, this *memoria* encompasses the principate as a whole, the account of which was his life’s work.

The reference to his literary style as “unformed and rough” is conventional: by the time he began his literary career, he was viewed as one of the foremost orators of his day. Ogilvie and Richmond (1978 ad loc.) comment upon the conventionality of the phrase, and upon the fact that Tacitus is referring “to the neglect of his own literary powers,” that is, engaging in oratory as opposed to historiography. From another perspective, however, Tacitus’s voice is unpracticed because he has lacked the power to exercise it with *libertas*—the freedom accorded a senator by the emperor to speak openly his opinion in the service of the government.⁷ To do so entails learning a whole new language.⁸ The *Agricola* marks the renewal of speech and the “interim” process of finding a discourse with which to write about Domitian, but it will nevertheless not be able to encompass events more personal to Tacitus, the nature of which has rendered his voice hoarse.⁹

6 *Incondita* has the ironic double meaning of “unformed” and “unentombed”: Tacitus’s voice may be rusty for this task, but it has not entirely gone underground. On the “commemorative function of [Tacitus’s] history,” see Hedrick 2000.164.

7 A distinction must be made between the republican and imperial senses of *libertas*. When Tacitus describes Nerva as having put together the previously incompatible *principatus ac libertas* (3.1), he refers to the latter: the emperor’s moderation with regard to his power and his willingness to recognize its “honorable position as the Emperor’s partner” (Wirszubski 1950.137). In 2.3, he refers to the last stages of republican *libertas* as the republican constitution broke down. Bearing this distinction in mind, I retain the Latin rather than translate it as “liberty.”

8 Described by John Henderson as “an elite practice in anti-language, held always just beyond reach of a secure reading” (1989.167). For the difficulties expressed in imperial literature with speaking or writing, see Henderson 1987, Bartsch 1998, and O’Higgins 1988.208–26 on Lucan; Malamud 1995 on poetic voice in Statius.

9 *interim* is the adverb Tacitus uses for the time of writing the *Agricola*: between composing the “*memoria* of the prior slavery and the evidence of our present good fortune” (3.3). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Most significantly for a nascent historian, the loss of voice during the previous regime threatened *memoria* (2.3): “et sicut vetus aetas vidit quid ultimum in libertate esset, ita nos quid in servitute, adempto per inquisitiones etiam loquendi audiendique commercio. memoriam quoque ipsam cum voce perdidissemus, si tam in nostra potestate esset oblivisci quam tacere,” “And just as a past age saw the ultimate in *libertas*, so we have seen the ultimate in slavery, with even the traffic of speaking and hearing taken away by espionage.¹⁰ We would have lost memory itself as well as voice, if it were as much in our power to forget as keep silent.”¹¹

For Tacitus, the memory of Agricola immediately conjures up his own past, which is painful because of the atrocities he witnessed during the later reign of Domitian.¹² The tone of the *Agricola* is both laudatory and conflicted. “Sciant, quibus moris est inlicita mirari, posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse” (“Those whose habit it is to admire lawless acts, let them know that there can be good men under bad emperors,” 42.4): Tacitus both asserts Agricola’s good character and defends him from the silent accusation of having served a tyrant. And Tacitus himself is a *magnus vir* of his own generation, clearly troubled by the atrocities he witnessed: “mox nostrae duxere Helvidium in carcerem manus; nos Maurici Rusticique visus <afflixit>, nos innocenti sanguine Senecio perfudit” (“Soon our hands dragged Helvidius to prison; the look that Maurici and Rusticus gave <put us to shame>; Senecio poured his innocent blood over us,” 45.1).¹³ His defense of Agricola might be read as his own *apologia*.¹⁴ Yet the *Agricola* contains very little else in the way of self-defense or self-accusation. Tacitus focuses instead on the problems of speaking, writing, and remembering after a period of terror. If the tyrant has nearly blotted out memory, what is left when he is gone?

Enigmatically, Tacitus describes himself and those who outlived

10 I have followed Ogilvie and Richmond 1978 ad loc. on the translation of *inquisitiones*.

11 On controlling memory as an aspect of the principate, see Gowing 2005.3, 30.

12 On Domitian’s consular victims, see Jones 1992.182–92; on the “supposed degeneration of Domitian’s character,” Southern 1997.117.

13 For the difficulties with *visus* and the verb that seems to be missing, see Ogilvie and Richmond 1978.309. For Stoic opposition in the principate, see Brunt 1975.7–35; under Domitian in particular, Jones 1992.119–25.

14 On the guilt of the Romanian people after the fall of socialism, which forms a close parallel with what Tacitus says of his own era, see Salecl 1998.85: “They denounced their colleagues to save their own skins, they did not oppose injustices when they should have, or they simply kept quiet.” More generally on political guilt, see Salecl 1994.

Domitian as “survivors of ourselves” (*nostri superstites*, 3.2), implying that the circumstances of tyranny are a kind of death even for those who did not actually lose their lives, that they left behind an unrecoverable part of themselves, and that this death or loss is engendered by the repression of speech. Of Tacitus’s self, what is left over after the terror must find its voice. This is the only way that history and Tacitus himself will pass into *memoria*. Rather than a defense or recrimination, then, the *Agricola* is an assertion of self, or a self-representation, at a time when terror has almost erased the possibility of speaking about himself or anything else.¹⁵

Breaking a silence that had lasted for fifteen years will be difficult, as Tacitus attests when he calls his voice “unformed and rough.”¹⁶ Tacitus’s voice is unpracticed in the language of *libertas*, but the phrase is also a metaphor for the degeneration of memory after a period of enforced silence.¹⁷ For Tacitus, *Agricola* is both worthy to be admired and commemorated and stands for a whole era of extreme political repression of speech. Tacitus admires the good qualities of the man, which, as an orator, he can extol with great skill, but for talking about the period *Agricola* embodies, his voice is rusty. We are not supposed to believe that we are about to read something poorly written, but something poorly and painfully remembered, and therefore difficult to discuss. The tyranny of Domitian encompassed not only the murder of innocent men, but the near silencing of their memory and of history itself.¹⁸ Because of Domitian’s suppression both of the past

15 On the erasure of language after a traumatic event, see Steiner 1967. Against Steiner, Friedländer argues for analysis of the discourses that are created as a means of displacement or denial of the event (1984.92–115).

16 LaCapra 2001.4 discusses the illusion of “an open window on the past” created by a transparent style of writing history. Speaking specifically about the Holocaust, he invokes Theodore Adorno and Paul Celan’s notion that “language has been so distorted or corrupted by political and propagandistic uses that it must be made strange, difficult, even resistant to pleasure in order to be used again.” But the observation is useful for understanding what critics have always described as Tacitus’s opaque and elliptical style.

17 By *Ann.* 4.35, however, he asserts that, as a historian, he can give a voice to the past that tyrants have tried to silence.

18 See Hedrick 2000.131–70 for a general discussion of the theme of silence in Tacitean historiography. Hedrick’s claim that the Domitianic regime has left an indelible psychological mark upon the historian is consonant with my own, but overall he focuses on the *Agricola* as the fulfillment of a debt owed the dead—an example of Tacitus’s view of the historian’s duty. In so doing, Hedrick asserts, Tacitus “rehabilitates that ‘part of himself,’ just as he rehabilitates ‘a part of *Agricola*,’ by giving an account, through his history” (167). While Hedrick provides a good general commentary on the commemorative function of the text, he steers clear of delineating the psychological factors involved in writing it.

and of the speech of his subjects, Tacitus as a historian has a double job to do: he must rescue both the past from oblivion and the voices that had been silenced in the past from forgetting how to speak. For him, past and voice have become a single problem; in the *Agricola*, he must find a way to address it if he is to carry on with his historiographical project.

When Tacitus speaks of an excess of liberty (“quid in ultimum libertate esset”), he refers to the combination of lawlessness and political multivocalism of the late republic. With this, he contrasts the servility of his own generation, which has been beaten back by tyranny and its agents (the *inquisitiones*).¹⁹ What the effects of too much liberty are upon memory, he does not specify, but the transformation of citizens into slaves is accompanied by the loss of the means (voice and hearing, *loquendi audiendique*) to exchange, record, and transmit memories. Slaves do not have histories.²⁰ They may see and note everything—the most reliable testimony is that of the eyewitness, according to the ancient historiographical tradition—but they cannot give testimony authoritatively. Yet Tacitus asserts that somehow memory survives, although he implies that forgetting, like curbing one’s speech, might be an easier and safer option.

In fact, history shows us many examples of the consequences an official “forgetting” of events can have. In his 1997 film *Chile: Obstinate Memory*, Patricio Guzman documents the distress of several survivors of the Pinochet regime who cannot verify the deaths of their relatives and friends because of Pinochet’s 1978 self-amnesty, and whose experiences are further silenced by the fact that very few young Chileans today know or want to know anything about this recent historical event.²¹ Similarly, the

19 For a contemporary senatorial audience debilitated and ground down through trying to “read” Tiberius (another emperor under whom liberty was thought to have been eroded), see Morello 350–53 in this volume.

20 At least from the point of view of the master. See Bradley 1987.53 for the practice of selling slaves away from their slave families with no regard for the longevity of familial ties; in terms of a personal history, this might mean a slave did not even know his parents. See also Joshel 1992.29 on the foreign slave’s loss of “ethnic or national heritage.” Thus even though Roman law recognized the origin of the slave in the sense that it had to be advertised at the time of sale, it did not recognize continuity in a slave’s life.

21 In her online review of the film (*H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/exhibit/showrev.cgi?path=70>), Margaret Power summarizes the situation in the following way: “Thirty-five percent of the youth questioned had no idea what had happened on September 11, 1973, the day the Chilean military overthrew the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. Equally, thirty-five percent did not know anything about Augusto Pinochet or his regime. Forty-two percent had never

1915 genocide of the Armenians by the Turks still goes largely unrecognized as an official part of Turkish history.²² Documentarians of all types, both scholarly and artistic, have become aware of the need both to tell these stories and to create discourses that can adequately represent the events and experiences that constitute them.

In his 2002 film *Ararat*, Atom Egoyan uses a complex narrative structure to tell the story of the Armenian genocide. The film combines the story of an Armenian art historian's research on Arshile Gorky, an Armenian painter who escaped to America but later committed suicide, with that of the circumstances behind an evocative painting Gorky made of his mother and himself as a young boy, before the massacre in which she was killed.²³ Into the story, Egoyan weaves the art historian's involvement as a historical consultant for a stirring film of the genocide made by a survivor—a film with which she often finds fault for its lack of historical accuracy. Egoyan's film also treats her relationship with her son, who feels strong ties to his historical and cultural heritage although he did not grow up in his ancestral country. The whole narrative is framed by the participation of a customs official, who hears the story from the son as the latter returns from a trip to Turkey where he shot some “real” footage of the place for the filmmaker.

Egoyan confronts the role of personal memory in history head-on and in many guises: the Armenian art historian's scholarly research, the painter's representation of what he lost in the genocide, the filmmaker's dramatized recreation, the son's quest for identity in a past he can only experience

heard of Salvador Allende (*La Tercera*, 23 July 1998). Although these figures reveal a variety of things, they indicate two facts that are relevant to this review of the film. First, they demonstrate the extent to which the seventeen-year dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet negatively influenced people's awareness of their own history. Second, more subtly, they reveal the extensive process of depoliticalization that the military government achieved or attempted to achieve during its rule.”

22 Hitler used the amnesia surrounding the Armenian genocide to fortify his own arguments for mass ethnic destruction: “I have placed my death-head formations in readiness—for the present only in the East—with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (*Lebensraum*) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” For the German original, cf. *Akten zur Deutschen Auswartigen Politik 1918–1945* 1956.171–72. For the English translation, see Lochner 1942.1–4.

23 *Portrait of the Artist and his Mother* 1926–35: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

secondhand. Throughout, Egoyan focuses on the effect of remembering on those who survived the remembered events. The art historian chooses to interpret Gorky's enigmatic painting through rational academic discourse, though she feels passionately about the subject; Gorky could not bear the memory and killed himself; and so on.

In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs, Egoyan also underlines the role of the listener in the transmission of memory.²⁴ In *Ararat*, the customs official fulfills this role. The son, Raffi, must work hard to convince him that the cans of film, which cannot be opened without being destroyed, do not, in fact, contain drugs. Raffi persuades the official by relating his own version of the genocide story. With his own film, Egoyan demonstrates various ways in which the remembered story can also be made convincing to another; it is the story in the end that propagates memory. In the interview, Egoyan points to the film's paradoxical pairing of the art historian's horror when someone tries to destroy Gorky's painting with her horror at the historical inaccuracies of the film. The "right" way to tell the story of an atrocity is a contestable issue. What seems clearer is the need to produce a memory in the form of a story that can satisfy from the pieces of the act of remembering—but it seems that it can only satisfy an outsider. There is no satisfactory story for the insider.²⁵ In the end, *Ararat* demonstrates the simultaneous desire for and impossibility of finding a common language with which to remember a disaster that is part of one's own personal history.²⁶

The memorializing of Agricola as *Agricola* represents a first step toward creating a discourse for talking about Domitian.²⁷ Tacitus draws attention to the bond between himself and his senatorial peers when he describes the distinction between Domitian's active gaze and their own pas-

24 www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/egoyan-atom-021129.shtml

25 Cf. John F. Kihlstrom in an online essay entitled "Memory, Autobiography, History": "Remembering is a problem-solving activity, where the problem is to give a coherent account of some past event, and the memory is the solution to that problem" (<http://listsocrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/rmpa00.htm>, 5).

26 Cf. Breuer and Freud 1957.8 (cf. Roth 1994.337): "The injured person's reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely cathartic effect if it is an *adequate* reaction." To summarize more fully: the reaction can be seen as a reaction in language. If the injured person cannot talk about a past trauma, integrate it into a life story, in such a way as to neutralize the psychological damage it does, s/he does not experience an adequate response to it.

27 By inaugurating speech after the silence of the Domitianic terror, the *Agricola* both describes a subject (the silence) and enacts what it says (it begins speaking)—in speech-act theory parlance, it is a "performative" as well as a "constative" utterance. For a succinct summary of the two as they apply to historical writing, see Hedrick 2000.137.

sive and miserable acceptance of it (45.2). Thus his personal memories, as he describes them in the *Agricola*, derive not just from his own experience but that of his social group as well. Much scholarship has been devoted to the “senatorial bias” against the principate, and there have been several attempts to rehabilitate the “bad” emperors by debunking this bias.²⁸ The assumption is that writers like Tacitus and Pliny are overstretching the truth in their accounts of Domitian and therefore damaging the historical record. This assumption has modern counterparts in the reactions to the stirring autobiographies of Benjamin Wilkomirski (*Fragments*) and Rigoberta Menchu (*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*), both of whom claim to have lived through eras of terror. In fact, it has been discovered that neither of them could have actually had all the experiences they describe. Public reaction largely focuses on the cheapening effects that such “fictionalization” has upon grave historical realities. But in his essay “Memory, Autobiography, History” (see note 25, above), John F. Kihlstrom concludes that personal memory is as much about the collective experience of a period as it is about individual factual recollections: “Individual memories are also constructed around tacit theories of society: personal narratives are part of social narratives, and vice-versa.” Other sides of Domitian’s character have certainly been exposed by historians, yet according to Kihlstrom’s theory, these do not invalidate the experience of Tacitus and his peers, nor the story of these experiences that Tacitus tells in the *Agricola*, as important contributions to the historical record. Indeed, Tacitus’s characterization of his voice as “unformed and rough” may be his own way of saying that his narrative does not encompass truths that can be known in some absolute fashion, apart from memory, and apart from the language with which that memory is expressed.²⁹

Tacitus’s claim that “we would have lost memory itself as well as voice, if it had been as much in our power (*in nostra potestate*) to forget as to keep silent” suggests paradoxically that a tyrannized subject simultaneously has a *desire* to forget and the inability to do so: if he had the ability

28 On Domitian, cf. particularly Waters 1963 and 1964. For a more balanced assessment that legitimates both Domitian’s achievements and the hostility of the senate toward him, see Jones 1992, particularly the chapters on the aristocracy. Also focusing on the historical record, D’Ambra 1993 illuminates Domitian’s moral reforms. For a defense of Tacitus’s oeuvre as a plausible account of Domitianic rule rather than merely a senatorially biased one, see Wilson 2003.523–42.

29 Cf. Hutton 1993.72: “What is at issue here is not how history can recover memory but, rather, what memory will bequeath to history.”

to forget, he would, but he cannot. The tyrannized subject can, in turn, tyrannize his own power of speech, but memory is powerful too. Divided from himself in this way, the subject is weakened. Tacitus wishes to heal the division in favor of remembering, but he compares the psychological effects of the Domitianic regime to a sickness to which its subjects have become so habituated that they do not wish to revive themselves (3.1–2):

Nunc demum redit animus; et quamquam primo statim beatissimi saeculi ortu Nerva Caesar res olim dissociabiles miscuerit, principatum ac libertatem, augeatque cotidie felicitatem temporum Nerva Traianus, nec spem modo ac votum securitas publica, sed ipsius voti fiduciam ac robur adsumpserit, natura tamen infirmitatis humanae tardiora sunt remedia quam mala; et ut corpora nostra lente augescunt, cito extinguuntur, sic ingenia studiaque oppresseris facilius quam revocaveris: subit quippe etiam ipsius inertiae dulcedo, et invisa primo desidia postremo amatur.

Now, at last, our spirit has returned; and although immediately at the very outset of this most happy age, Nerva Caesar put together irreconcilable states, the principate and liberty, and Nerva Trajan has daily increased the good fortune of the times; nor has the public safety only enlisted hope and prayer, but the guarantee of the prayer itself, and the strength therefrom—nevertheless, because of the nature of human weakness, cures are slower to act than ills; and to the degree our bodies develop slowly, they are quickly annihilated—so much more easily can you oppress talent and enthusiasm than call it back. For a pleasure in inaction itself comes over one, and the slackness that is hateful at first, one loves in the end.³⁰

In *Epistles* 8.14.9, Pliny, too, uses the metaphor of the body to express the distressed state of the body politic under Domitian and its recovery with the accession of Nerva:

30 For the difficulties of the pairing of *spem . . . votum* and *fiduciam . . . robur*, see Ogilvie and Richmond 1978 ad loc.

Eadem mala iam senatores, iam participes malorum multos per annos vidimus tulimusque; quibus ingenia nostra in posterum quoque hebetata fracta contusa sunt. Breve tempus (nam tanto brevius omne quanto felicius tempus) quo libet scire quid simus, libet exercere quod scimus.

As senators, first, we saw the same ills, then as accomplices for many years, we endured them; because of this, our characters were blunted, broken, beaten, with an effect that lasted into the future. The time has been short (for any time is shorter to the degree that it is happier) in which we wish to know our capabilities, and enforce what we know.

Three differences from Tacitus's account claim our attention, however. First, Tacitus's order is the reverse of Pliny's: in the *Agricola*, he mentions the recovery before discussing the illness, and accords the latter as much space as the former. Second, he describes the illness as something the body politic internalizes, like a disease, whereas Pliny uses the metaphor of physical violence and coercion.³¹ Third, Pliny's final phrase is echoed not so much in the *Agricola* as at the beginning of the *Histories*, where Tacitus characterizes the new era as a "most happy time in which you are allowed think what you want and say what you think" ("rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet," 1.1). For Tacitus, then, it is a matter of being *allowed* (*licet*), whereas Pliny sees it as the possibility of exercising one's will (*libet*).³² And Tacitus says of this happy time that he will write about it if he lives long enough, but he never did. The beginning of the *Agricola* implies that if the past is not fully open to public discourse,

31 For Tacitus's use of the imagery of disease in another context, see Woodman 312–19 in this volume.

32 Tacitus's use of *libet* packs a punch in the Cremutius Cordus episode, where he declares that "it is pleasing to laugh at the stupidity of those who believe that the memory of succeeding era can be killed off by the present exercise of power" ("socordiam eorum inridere libet, qui praesenti potentia credunt extingui posse etiam sequentis aevi memoriam," *Ann.* 4.35.6). Tacitus's pleasure derives from the knowledge that Cremutius Cordus (and he himself) will have the last laugh, though in the present circumstances, there is no possibility of freely exercising one's ability to write as one pleases. Even under a good emperor, what one writes is still a matter of *licet*. Pliny seems to feel less of a constraint.

the present cannot actually be spoken. However lenient the emperor, it is impossible to say exactly what you think about the political situation of the past, not because the new emperor censors you, but because the whole political system—the rule of one person, even if benign—has made and makes a discourse about itself impossible. Thinking what you want under the political conditions of empire is not the same thing as thinking what you want under the republic; thought itself has become constrained in such a way as to make the memory and record of the past a dubious project.

Pliny, on the other hand, believes that knowledge has now been restored to its rightful place and can once more be exercised by him and his peers (in particular, knowledge of the legal procedure about which he queries the recipient of his letter). But for Tacitus, the nature of the disease claims as much attention as the recovery, which has been internalized and become difficult if not impossible to separate from the cure. The time of recovery is one of which Tacitus does not (or cannot) write.

In an essay entitled “Freud’s Uses and Abuses of the Past,” Michael Roth’s first objects of discussion are Freud’s two claims that the memory of the past can be a cause of distress and, simultaneously, a pathway to pleasure: “Pleasure is always sought along routes that carry us through our histories” (Roth 1994.336). Roth argues that psychoanalysis, which is rooted in memory and the past, helps us “to acknowledge, to claim, a past with which we can live, to grasp our desires in relation to our pasts” (336). What Tacitus describes at the beginning of the *Agricola*, however, is a society in which desire has turned against itself and become a desire for inactivity, its opposite. After the death of Domitian, left in such a state, society remains caught between a traumatic past and the inability to turn it into something with which it can live. The apathy that is the death of desire makes any positive interaction of present and past impossible.³³

The introduction of the *Agricola* records attempts on the part of past regimes to silence testimonials (*monumenta*) to the lives of famous men and therefore blot out their memory, as those who wanted to silence Cremutius Cordus tried to do. Books were burned, and Tacitus says that those regimes imagined that with them were destroyed not only the memory of those the authors extolled but also “the voice of the people, the liberty of the senate,

33 Tacitus’s description of Domitian as “in a single, unbroken convulsion drain[ing] his country’s lifeblood” underlines the symbolic death of Domitian’s subjects represented here as *inertia*.

the conscience of the human race” (2.2).³⁴ The loss of memory, according to Tacitus, eventually eradicates three bases of society: class, represented by the people and their ability to speak freely; political position, represented by the senate and its ability to judge freely; and, finally, moral awareness (“the conscience of the human race”), which, in its generality, implies a combination of the other two. It is vital to create and preserve memory not only because of its link to history and the past but also to transhistorical categories like freedom and morality that create the possibility for reflection and self-reflection; on the other hand, too much self-reflection fosters questioning and criticism of political and social structures.³⁵ Under a repressive

34 Contrast the traditional Roman view on memory and history with those presented in Socrates’ myth of Theuth (Plato *Phaed.* 274e–75b). According to King Thamus, in inventing writing, Theuth did not create a potion (*pharmakon*) for memory and wisdom, but rather a poison that will induce people to forget. Memory and wisdom should be practiced from inside the mind and not depend upon the written signs of others. Tacitus’s *consolatio* to Agricola’s wife and daughter at the end of the text expresses a variation of Thamus’s admonition: Agricola should be remembered not so much in statuary and corporeal images but in the *mores* of those who survive him. Nevertheless, the writing of Agricola’s life will preserve his *memoria* (see discussion below). Thus Tacitus distinguishes between copies (*simulacra*) of Agricola and the textual representation of him. It is not as strong as Thamus’s distinction between speech and writing, and, in fact, draws these two closer to one another by excluding physical representations such as statuary. *Memoria* for Tacitus consists of a combination of internalizing what is to be remembered and commemorating it in speech.

35 Cf. Penwill 2003 on the relationship between politics and philosophy during the Flavian regime. Vespasian and Domitian both expelled the philosophers, but more interesting is the attitude demonstrated by two members of the so-called “Stoic Opposition” as discovered in Tacitus’s narrative of the senatorial trials conducted after the death of Vitellius (*Hist.* 4.6–10). Helvidius Priscus, deprived of a victory against Eprius Marcellus, went on to challenge Vespasian so stridently that the emperor eventually had him put to death. However Helvidius’s opposition stemmed not so much from strong philosophical conviction as from the desire to make a name for himself (351). Musonius prosecuted P. Egnatius Celer for informing against Barea Sorens and might be seen as acting according to genuine philosophical conviction because, in becoming an informer, Celer had abandoned his Stoic principles, but Demetrius the Cynic steps up to accuse Musonius of ostentation and (implicitly) of using Celer as a scapegoat in a quarrel between senators, “taking advantage of a new situation to settle old scores” (349). Further, in Tacitus’s narrative, reactions to Helvidius’s actions emphasize that virtue lies not in empty action but in “playing a constructive role in politics or philosophy” (353), that is, philosophy as practical wisdom of some kind, not, as one finds in the Platonic dialogues, a mode of self-reflection. Penwill also mentions Quintilian’s distrust of the latter sort of philosophy, favoring instead the orator’s ability to shape moral argument: to teach *mores* from the outside in. Such a method does not lead to any examination of these *mores*. Finally, in a state where the emperor is known as *sapientissimus*, philosophy and tyranny have become discursively indistinguishable from one another.

regime, the only safe option is not to think too hard, which, in turn, produces inaction and the erosion of moral awareness. It therefore comes as no surprise when Tacitus tells us that these circumstances are accompanied by the exile of philosophers, and almost immediately thereafter *Agricola* is introduced to us as the model Roman, whose prudent mother sees to his abandoning of philosophy early in life.³⁶

The *Agricola* will be an assertion that Tacitus remembers and wants to create a memory of the tyranny that will survive. Although he concedes that he writes in much happier times than Domitian's reign of terror, he also makes clear that the emperor is still the only source of public (in)security. The only recourse the public has is still *spes ac votum*, hope and prayer, the instruments of servility. If they are lucky, and have a good emperor such as Nerva or Trajan, they will obtain what they want: some measure of free speech, a reprieve from the fear of their speech turned against them. But luck is as much a feature of living under an absolute ruler as are hope and prayer: the next emperor might be just as bad or worse than the one before. Thus the idea of a "previous ill" is oxymoronic, since the continuation of the principate itself represents the problem. Tacitus makes this clear when he says that reliance on Trajan's promise—the promise of one man, the emperor—is what sustains the people.

Nevertheless, a measure of freedom has been restored, and Tacitus is not antipathetic toward Nerva and Trajan themselves. Yet he does not begin his new career by writing about Domitian directly. Instead, he chooses as a subject his father-in-law, who represents the victims of the Domitianic era without actually having been murdered and without Tacitus's having

36 *Agricola's* abandonment of philosophy is not to be equated with the expulsion of the philosophers that Tacitus mentions at 2.2 (*Agricola's* youthful forays into the life of the mind would have pre-dated the Domitianic regime). Tacitus had no time for Stoic grandstanding either, as we see at 42.4; but *Agricola's* attitude represents a larger ideological antipathy to philosophical speculation—as embodied in Quintilian's pragmatic attitude and in Anchises' remarks to Aeneas in the underworld about the Roman virtues. These are to be the arts of war and subjugation, not sculpture, science, and rhetoric (*Aen.* 6.846–53). Penwill ends his essay on politics and philosophy in the Flavian regime with an anecdote in which he summarizes what Tacitus obliquely suggests by telling us that his father-in-law, a military man, fondly remembers his philosophical youth but recognized his mother's prudence in getting him to give it up: Trajan invited the philosopher Dio to ride in his triumphal chariot with him, but when it came to conversation, as Philostratus reports it, said: "I don't know what you are talking about, but I love you as I love myself." "In other words," as Penwill eloquently puts it, "'I'm not interested in anything you have to tell me, but your presence here does wonders for my image'" (2003.368).

participated in his downfall. He is a subject about whom Tacitus can speak without directly confronting his own feelings about the recent past; *Agricola* is close to, but not identical with himself (a kind of “I have a friend who . . .” strategy).³⁷ *Agricola* appears at first to be an exemplary figure. Yet Tacitus also refers to the *inertia* of *Agricola* under Nero (6.3): “mox inter quaesturam ac tribunatum plebis atque ipsum etiam tribunatus annum quiete et otio transiit, gnarus sub Nerone temporum, quibus inertia pro sapientia fuit,” “After [the death of his son], he spent in quiet and retirement the year between his quaestorship and his tribunate of the plebs, and the year of his tribuneship, too. He was familiar with the times under Nero, during which inaction was the better part of wisdom.”

Because he also presents *Agricola* as a *magnus vir*, this statement seems, on the one hand, to contradict the negative judgment he has already passed on his own *inertia* and that of the other survivors; on the other, it implies that *Agricola* did not hold himself to a very high standard of virtue. Tacitus does not directly criticize *Agricola*; in fact, *inertia* here looks ironically like a virtue that is almost wisdom—but not quite. Tacitus cannot be making the statement based upon personal experience under Nero, of which he had none; rather, “during which” effects a transition from his own words to those that a Neronian survivor might employ.³⁸ The irony of the statement further distances it from Tacitus’s overall praise of *Agricola*’s greatness and casts a shadow upon the eulogistic tone of the text as a whole. *Agricola* had already witnessed a form of tyranny like the one that made Tacitus feel guilty, but *Agricola*’s own reaction was simply to choose the safest and most expedient course—having abandoned early the art of reflection on the nature of things and one’s relation to them.

But *Agricola* is not criminal in the way that Tacitus feels himself

37 Wilson 2003.533–34, arguing that post-Domitianic literature hostile to that regime cannot all simply represent flattery of Trajan, observes that Tacitus’s targeted audience in the *Agricola* is posterity (1.1 and 46.4) and that he is not writing “a manifesto for the Emperor Trajan and the new imperial aristocracy” as Syme would have it (1958.125). If so, Tacitus also effects a further distancing of himself from the recent traumatic past by projecting it (in the guise of *Agricola* and the *Agricola*) into the future, leaving the present a kind of empty space that he has yet to discover how to fill.

38 See Henderson 1989.188–89 on *silentium*—as practiced at Nero’s banquet for Britannicus and at Britannicus’s subsequent murder—as the cardinal imperial virtue: “*Silentium*, holding your peace, is an imperial *word*—here taken to pieces.” Tacitus will have to reactivate the body politic from the passivity of *silentium* and *inertia* by the speaking (out) of history and the making of memory.

to be because he did not have to participate actively in the kinds of crimes that characterized the later reign of Domitian. Because of its somewhat negative tone in the description of Agricola's behavior under Nero and the focus on Tacitus's own ambiguous feelings about the new regime and his conduct under the old one, the *Agricola*, in part, reflects Tacitus's resentment at his father-in-law's escape. Agricola apparently did not feel the need after the death of Nero to account for his participation in that regime, and his own death lets him off the hook with respect to his career under Domitian. Tacitus calls Agricola "happy" because he did not have to witness what happened in the later Domitianic era. In so doing, Tacitus comments negatively upon the times, in which a good man should be thankful simply to have avoided even worse atrocities, and also draws a bitter comparison between a father-in-law who served to the end a corrupt and increasingly despotic regime and the son-in-law who inherited some share of that regime's criminality.

The mixture of generic elements in the *Agricola* contributes as much to the expression of trauma and guilt as does the content of the narrative. The rhetorical structure of the biography looks familiar: Tacitus includes a short overview of Agricola's early familial, civil, and military activities that ends with Tacitus's marriage to Agricola's daughter and Agricola's departure for Britain. The large middle section of the text recounts Agricola's successes against the Britons, the highlight of which is an account of the battle at the Mons Graupius and the speeches given before it by Agricola and the Britons' leader Calgacus. Tacitus then narrates Agricola's last years after his recall to Rome and ends in traditional style with the *consolatio*.

But the *Agricola* disguises several other genres under the cloak of biography.³⁹ This subterfuge is an entirely imperial gesture, as Tacitus himself tells us at the beginning of the *Annals* when he announces that, under the Augustan principate, "the magistracies had the same names" (*eadem magistratuum vocabula*, 1.3.7).⁴⁰ Imperial discourse is founded on a word, republic, that now has a profoundly different meaning and that covers a host of different governing practices.⁴¹ Tacitus's choice of a familiar genre that is not quite what it seems to be enables him both to imitate and reinvent

39 On the *Agricola* as an example of biography with a twist, see Ogilvie and Richmond 1978.11–13.

40 For a discussion of the importance of the phrase in Tacitus's analysis of imperial discourse, see Haynes 2004.

41 On imperial doublespeak, see Bartsch 1994.

imperial discourse. In imitation, Tacitus presents his audience with a mirror of what they have by now accepted as the structure of speaking itself since the beginnings of the principate. As a reinvention, by calling attention to how “badly” he writes, he uses imperial discourse to interrogate itself.⁴²

Our interpretive options as Tacitus’s posterity are disquieting. If Tacitus’s immediate projected reader recognizes his face in the mirror, he either understands the ominous implication that language itself constitutes a large part of his servitude to the emperor or he uncritically accepts it. Meanwhile, Tacitus’s “bad” writing—in particular here the refusal to settle comfortably into one genre—edgily reminds us of the fact that speaking about himself is an unhappy prospect because of the recent past. Between imitation and reinvention, the *Agricola* commemorates the damage that trauma and guilt do to memory, and hence to history.

Agricola’s exploits in Britain seem an obvious choice for a dutiful son-in-law to commemorate because they represent his greatest success as a commander. Yet his choice to distinguish himself in such a way also heralds his greatest failure and humiliation during a regime in which command only emanates from one source.⁴³ We cannot know how Tacitus conducted his career or his relationship with Domitian. His success indicates that he was smarter about it than his father-in-law, although the *Agricola* is largely a testament to the dubious nature of such an accolade, as is the somewhat self-defensive admission, at the beginning of the *Histories*, of his advancement during the Domitianic period: “dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano incohatam, a Tito auctam, a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim” (“That my position was established by Vespasian, increased by Titus, very far advanced by Domitian, I would not deny,” 1.1). But Tacitus does report a striking topic of conversation that his father-in-law liked to bring up and that demonstrates a rather chilling ignorance of the possible effects of imperial rule upon his own fate: “saepe ex eo audiui legione una et modicis auxiliis debellari obtinerique Hiberniam posse; idque etiam adversus Britanniam profuturum, si Romana ubique arma et velut e conspectu libertas tolleretur” (“I often heard from him that, with one legion and a moderate number of auxiliaries, Ireland could be overpowered and held; and that this, too, would

42 Cf. Henderson 1989.167: “Tacitus’s *Annals* are, before all, ‘bad’ writing, some of the best ‘bad’—the ‘baddest’ Latin there is.”

43 On such tensions between emperors and generals under the principate, see Ash in this volume, who discusses Corbulo.

be useful in dealing with Britain, if Roman troops were everywhere and liberty would sink, so to speak, out of sight," *Agr.* 24.3).

At one level, *Agricola* is speaking of Britain. Tacitus portrays him as one might imagine an older military man, stabbing the air with his pipe and reliving with his dutiful son-in-law past strategies and accomplishments: conquering Ireland would be a useful demonstration to the upstart Britons of who had the upper hand. But *libertas* is a loaded term for an imperial subject. Tacitus begins the *Agricola* by talking about how Domitian turned *libertas* into *servitus*.⁴⁴ Certainly conditions under Nerva and Trajan have greatly improved, but if there is always the possibility of another Domitian, *libertas* can only ever be a temporary state. Romans themselves have had their *libertas* wiped out, and conquering other peoples takes the place of reflecting on their own suffering. Calgacus the Briton says of the Romans: "Where they make a wasteland, they call it peace" ("ubi solitudinem faciunt pacem appellant," 30.5). His remark refers to the literal devastation the Romans leave behind but also suggests a kind of inner emptiness that they spread, leaving only the hollow ideology of *pax* in its place. The Romans, too, are a displaced people—psychologically, if not literally.

Tacitus also portrays *Agricola* as ambitious. Of his initial success in Britain, Tacitus says: "ne laureatis quidem gesta prosecutus est, sed ipsa dissimulatione famae famam auxit, aestimantibus quanta futuri spe tam magna tacuisset" ("He did not even follow up his achievement by affixing laurels to his despatches; yet with the very concealment of glory, he increased his glory in the eyes of those who were reckoning with how great a hope for the future he kept such great deeds quiet," 18.6). The statement about Ireland unwittingly bared some rather tyrannical teeth; but whether *Agricola* understands what he is saying or not, he is very much an unself-reflective product of his era. He speaks a language of *dominatio* that no longer knows the difference between itself and its opposite. To *Agricola*, it seems obvious that the *libertas* of others must be wiped out or he would not boast that he could achieve it with a small number of men. The question is, does he make such a boast because he himself would like the power that would accompany such a wiping-out or does he merely parrot the power that wants it? Either way, he falls victim to a structure of governance that can give rise to its unpredictable and cruel exercise.

44 On imperial manifestations of *servitus* in the *Histories*, see Pomeroy 180–81 in this volume.

Tacitus is often ambiguous about Agricola's character. He prefers to advertise Agricola's virtues via *sententiae* that leave the reader on the ropes: "ita virtute in obsequendo, verecundia in praedicando extra invidiam nec extra gloriam erat" ("So by steadfastness in obedience and modesty in self-advertisement, he was beyond envy but not praise," 8.3); or the more extended and puzzling (9.3–5):

nec illi, quod est rarissimum, aut facilitas auctoritatem aut severitas amorem deminuit. integritatem atque abstinentiam in tanto viro referre iniuria virtutum fuerit. ne famam quidem, cui saepe etiam boni indulgent, ostentanda virtute aut per artem quaesivit: procul ab aemulatione adversus collegas, procul a contentione adversus procuratores et vincere inglorium at atteri sordidum arbitrabatur.

Nor where he was concerned—a most rare occurrence—did either affability diminish his authority or strictness affection. It would be an insult to his virtues to mention the uprightness and self-restraint in such a man. Not even glory, for which even good men allow the free play of their desire, did he seek by showing off his excellence or by intrigue; far from rivalry against his colleagues, far from conflict with the imperial procurators, he considered winning inglorious and being beaten degrading.

Thus Agricola is introduced to us as a kind of cipher; his subsequent actions can be interpreted through two lenses: [A]: "extra invidiam . . . erat; vincere inglorium . . . arbitrabatur" or [B]: "nec extra gloriam erat; atteri sordidum arbitrabatur." But the third possibility is that, in an era such as Domitian's, it behooves you to keep your actions as ambiguous as possible, to be perceived as keeping your head down and your blinders on. Whether he managed it consciously or by pure dumb luck, the character of Agricola represents the best possible alternative in the portion of Domitian's reign he lived to see: what he did *not* live to see, as Tacitus bitterly remarks, was the time when even that alternative was no longer viable.

Yet Tacitus ennobles these qualities of ignorance, obedience, and good faith, while illustrating the sacrifices of liberty and right government that make them possible. The *Agricola* bears witness to the fact that sometimes there are great men under bad emperors. But who benefits from their

goodness? Ultimately Agricola is lucky because he need have no memory of such bad times; he “made a present of his innocence,” as well as part of his estate, and got out of Dodge. Tacitus implies that in giving away his innocence to Domitian, Agricola died partly guilty. Apparently, however, Agricola did *not* die with a guilty conscience: “ut perhibent qui interfuerunt novissimis sermonibus tuis, constans et libens fatum exceperisti” (“As they bear witness who were present for your latest utterances, you accepted your fate steadily and cheerfully,” 45.3). Tacitus expresses a kind of jealousy at Agricola’s unconscious guilt that contributed to the larger circumstances of Tacitus and his peers destroying themselves through their criminal collaboration with Domitian.

Agricola occupies a double role in the text that bears his name: he acts as an example of the best one can do under a tyrant and the worst that such a “best” represents. He stands in for Tacitus’s morally ambivalent feelings about his own behavior, to which (obviously) he is too close to speak himself. Investigating Agricola gives Tacitus a way to investigate, try, and pass judgment upon himself and others in his position; only after this trial, can the investigation of the history of tyranny begin. Because of Agricola, Tacitus has the means to “survive himself” by voicing a memory that, if silenced, would blot out his own existence as well.

Agricola did not live to see happier times, and he also did not live to see Tacitus again. Tacitus ends the text as he began, reintroducing himself into the narrative as a part of Agricola’s life and the history of the times—but as an absent part, distancing himself once again from a subject that is literally a little too close to home. This distancing also forms part of the *consolatio* (46.3):

id filiae quoque uxori praeceperim, sic patris, sic mariti memoriam venerari, ut omnia facta dictaque eius secum revolvant, formamque ac figuram animi magis quam corporis complectantur; non quia intercedendum putem imaginibus quae marmore aut aere finguntur, sed, ut vultus hominum, ita simulacra vultus imbecilla ac mortalia sunt, forma mentis aeterna, quam tenere et exprimere non per alienam materiam et artem, sed tuis ipse moribus possis.

I would recommend the following to his daughter and to his wife: to venerate the memory of a father and hus-

band in such a way as to think over in their own minds all he did and said, and embrace the form and shape of his mind rather than of his body; not because I think that images made from marble or bronze should be forbidden, but just like the faces of men, so, too, are the faces of statues mortal and lacking substance. The form of the mind is eternal, which you yourself can preserve and model not through another's material and art but in your own character.

Others of Agricola's family should imitate his exemplary behavior, but Tacitus does not include himself in this group; he does not say "in *our* behavior." The "you" singular of *tuis* and *possis* is also unexpected. His initial address to the wife and daughter is indirect (*praeceperim . . . ut . . . revolvant*), so at this point, Tacitus turns to his reader, who can both identify with and condemn Agricola with the safety and objectivity of hindsight. In the last paragraph, he seems to confirm this (46.4):

quidquid ex Agricola amavimus, quidquid mirati sumus, manet mansurumque est in animis hominum, in aeternitate temporum, fama rerum; nam multos veterum velut inglorios et ignobiles oblivio obruet: Agricola posteritati narratus et traditus superstes erit.

Whatever we have loved in Agricola, whatever we have admired, remains and will remain in the minds of men, for the eternity of time, in the fame of his achievements; for oblivion will crush many men of past ages just as if they were undistinguished and unimportant. Agricola, narrated and handed down to posterity, will be a survivor.

Agricola suffered at the hands of the tyrant; he was a good man, a *magnus vir*, and his passing merits lamentation, as his life merits commemoration. Yet unlike Tacitus's, his passage into memory is an easy one: he has a gifted son-in-law who both knew the times and could write eloquently about them. What was good about Agricola will be remembered because Tacitus wrote about it, but the price of writing was the difficult plumbing of his own tortured past. *Narratus Agricola*: an Agricola whose story has been told, who has become a collection of (Tacitus's) words, and

so can be handed on to the memory of posterity. The *memoria* of Agricola is Tacitus's tale of the untellable, his fantasy of the ability to commemorate an era too unbearable for those who survived it to remember or record. The character and deeds of Agricola returned to the nascent historian the power of speech that he and his peers had lost, and they gave him the story he had to tell.⁴⁵

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