

## Biography at Rome

Much, perhaps too much, has been written on ancient biography as a literary genre with formal origins and fixed rules<sup>(1)</sup>. The present paper will spare the reader the piling of Pelion upon Ossa upon Olympus. For all of that, a few remarks are needed to establish a context both literary and historical for the biographical productions of Suetonius Tranquillus. It does him no discredit to observe that, for his time, he was in no way unique in his choice of genre or themes<sup>(2)</sup>. Of equal importance is the fact that it is no longer a simple matter of Romans commemorating the virtues of other Romans — or of themselves. By the age of Suetonius, biography is well ahead of the *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* ethos<sup>(3)</sup>. And for generations now, Roman reputations had been at the mercy of Greek memorialists; of whom, Plutarch is of paramount but not solitary importance to any discussion of Suetonius<sup>(4)</sup>.

Biography has its detractors. Syme, in one of his considerations of Suetonius, pronounced that “Biography offers the easy approach to history, and some go no further than biography”. Elsewhere, again with Suetonius in mind, this caustic conclusion is issued: “If biography is cheap and easy, so is edification”<sup>(5)</sup>. One imagines that Sir Ronald’s subsequent investigations into the *Historia Augusta* did nothing to change his mind.

Other scholars, in very classical style, take it upon themselves to lay down binding rules. Fergus Millar, in the course of returning a negative verdict

(1) See F. LEO, *Die Griechisch-Römische Biographie Nach Ihrer Literarischen Form*, Leipzig, 1901; D. R. STUART, *Epochs in Greek and Roman Biography*, Berkeley, 1928; T. A. DOREY (edit.), *Latin Biography*, London, 1967; A. MOMIGLIANO, *Development of Greek Biography*, Harvard, 1971, p. 96 f. (see his excellent bibliographies).

(2) In particular, see W. STEIDLE, *Sueton und die antike Biographie*, Munich, 1951; also the remarks of R. SYME, *Tacitus*, p. 91-2; 121; 125; 177; 227; 277; 501-4; A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, *Commentary*, Oxford, 1966, p. 239; 270; 321; 487; 510; H. BARDON, *La littérature latine inconnue*, Paris, 1952, vol. 2, p. 169f.; 207 f.

(3) Once nicely translated by Oscar Wilde as “Of the dead, speak only humbug.”

(4) See C. P. JONES, *Plutarch and Rome*, Oxford, 1971, p. 72 f.; E. L. BOWIE, *Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic in Past and Present*, 46, 1970, p. 15; G. BOWERSOCK, *Augustus and the Greek World*, Oxford, 1965, p. 122 f.

(5) *Tacitus*, p. 91; 503.

ist imperial biography<sup>(6)</sup>, asserted that "neither the actions of an emperor nor the politics of a particular reign can be meaningfully studied if the whole social context of the Imperial power has been examined over a substantial period, and perhaps not even then". A tall order. Meanwhile, the practice continues — as does the production of imperial biographies<sup>(7)</sup>.

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? By the end of the Republic and the start of the Principate, biography was well established at Rome, both as a distinct literary genre and as an offshoot of the encomiastic practices at Roman banquets and Roman banquets. Surely its practitioners had no need to defend their calling?

Not quite. According to Jerome, the first biographers of Rome were Varro, Pliny the Elder, Hyginus, and Nepos<sup>(8)</sup>. This may only mean that their works were the ones current in Jerome's day. Or that he derived the view from an earlier source and reproduced it out of context. For strictly speaking, the statement of Jerome is not true. The pursuit of autobiography, a genre characteristically Roman and relatively un-Greek<sup>(9)</sup>, had begun to branch out into biography at least by the time of Gaius Gracchus<sup>(10)</sup>.

It could also be the case that Jerome's dogma is contaminated by class prejudice; not necessarily his own. The dominant figures in the earlier history of biography at Rome are freedmen: Cornelius Epicadus, who edited and completed the autobiography of Sulla; L. Voltacilius Pitholaus, who commemorated the exploits of Pompeius Strabo and Pompeius Magnus; and Tiro, secretary and biographer of Cicero. The presence of freedmen in the development of a literary activity is in general terms unsurprising, when one considers the role of Greeks in the history of Roman culture<sup>(11)</sup>. And not in the least startling in the area of biography. For a major factor in the extension of autobiography into biography was the client who wrote up his patron's deeds for him. Nothing more logical, then, than that a freedman should mortalise his former master or present patron. Suetonius records that this

(6) In his review of: F. GROSSO, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* in *JRS*, 56, 1966, 243 f.

(7) See the criticism of F. Millar in my notice of R. Seager's *Tiberius* in *CW*, 66, 1973, 476-7; and, naturally enough, Seager's own introductory remarks.

(8) For the *testimonium*, see FUNAIOLI, *Grammaticae Romanae Fragmenta*, Leipzig, 1907, 384 (henceforth cited as *GRF*). There are good discussions by A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, 96; E. M. JENKINSON, *Cornelius Nepos and the Early History of Biography at Rome* in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Berlin, 1973, I, 3, p. 709.

(9) A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

(10) See the survey by E. BADIEN, *Latin Historians*, London, 1966, p. 1-38.

(11) See S. M. TREGGIARI, *Roman Freedmen during the Late Republic*, Oxford, 1969, 110 f.

trend was set in motion by the above-mentioned Voltacilius : *primus omnium libertinorum, ut Cornelius Nepos opinatur, scribere historiam orsus, nonnisi ab honestissimo quoque scribi ad id tempus* (12).

It is interesting that Cornelius Nepos is the source for this piece of information. For this is the biographer who wrote as part of his prefatory remarks : *non dubito fore plerosque, Attice, qui hoc genus scripturae leue et non satis dignum summorum uirorum personis iudicent* (13). It is all too easy to say that Nepos' productions are the best proof of this. But more than cheap hits are needed here. At first blush, Nepos' words are quite unexpected. Let them be placed alongside the celebrated opening of Tacitus' *Agricola* : *clarorum uirorum facta moresque posteris tradere, antiquitus usitatum, ne nostris quidem temporibus quamquam incuriosa suorum aetas omisit*.

Tacitus echoes the exordium of Cato's *Origines* here (14). Either directly, or through Cicero, who was understandably fond of recalling old Cato's approbations of what were the rudiments of biography. The society of Cicero and Nepos was steeped in the theory and practice of autobiographic and biographic memorial. There was the sanction of Cato, the old custom, doubtless preserved at the more traditional tables, of chanting *clarorum uiro- rum laudes atque uirtutes* at dinner parties, funeral eulogy, and the commissioning of realistic *imagines maiorum*. The connection between this last and formal biography was made as early as Tacitus, in the concluding stanzas of his *Agricola* (15).

In view of all this, why should Nepos feel that many Romans would regard biography as trivial and lacking in dignity? His words may, of course, be only a variant on the theme of simultaneous self-advertisement and self-deprecation. Another possibility is that they represent an oblique thrust against the *Imagines* or *Hebdomades* of Varro. They may, however, reflect some discontent at the presence of freedmen in the booming industry of biography. This would account for the inaccurate quartet of names put forward by Jerome (or his source), though it would leave Hyginus as an intruder even then (16).

(12) *De rhet.* 3 ; notice that *historia* is used of the *res gestae* of the two Pompeius', recorded by Voltacilius *compluribus libris*.

(13) See E. M. JENKINSON, *loc. cit.*

(14) On this, and for what follows, see the Ogilvie-Richmond edition of the *Agricola*, Oxford, 1967, p. 126.

(15) *Agric.*, 46, 3 ; cf. PLUTARCH, *Alex.*, 1, 3. Most recently, with due caution, by A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

(16) Momigliano's discussion oddly omits Hyginus.

There is no hint from the extant works that Suetonius felt any need to justify the composition of biographies. Of emperors and men of letters, that is. His accounts of infamous ladies may have required some prefatory apologies. Or perhaps not, for he was on well-travelled ground here also, as is demonstrated by the thirteenth book of Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*. Of course, something about the nature of biography could have been included in the lost prefatory remarks to Septicius Clarus. It is more to the general point that biography had developed so far from its origins that it could now be employed for purposes the reverse of encomiastic.

Plutarch, in a familiar passage, distinguishes between the writing of history and the composition of biographies. No energy is wasted in idle disquisitions on the virtues and vices of either genre, and there is no engaging in personalities. It was simply that his current subjects were too vast to admit every detail. Sensibly enough, Plutarch decided to make his comments at the outset of his biographies of Alexander and Caesar. In such a context, few would want to contest Plutarch's case. Yet it may be significant that he inserted his remarks where he did. It was impossible not to be partisan on Alexander and Caesar in Plutarch's time<sup>(17)</sup>. One also notices that Plutarch makes the same connection as Tacitus between the biographer and the maker of *imagines*; the appeal is patently to a Roman audience.

What Tacitus has to say about biography at the beginning of the *Agricola* is also instructive. The genre is sanctified by tradition, as indeed is autobiography; so much so that it still has life in it amidst the decadence of Tacitus' own time. The biographer will record great deeds and noble qualities for emulation by the present generation and for the edification of posterity. Predictable stuff.

Two examples of old-fashioned autobiography are cited: the memoirs of Rutilius Rufus, and those of M. Aemilius Scaurus. Standard references, to all intents and purposes. Yet Tacitus must have been aware of Cicero's melancholic comment on the three volumes of Scaurus' memoirs: *sane utiles, quos nemo legit*<sup>(18)</sup>. Was anyone reading them in Tacitus' time? Is his allusion to them a subtle plea for their revival? Or are we to detect a note of knowing mockery?

For balance, two examples of biography from the imperial age are furnished by Tacitus: the eulogies of Paetus Thrasea and Helvidius Priscus by Arulenus Rusticus and Herennius Senecio. These were pamphlets deemed subversive by

(17) See Livy, IX, 16. 19 f.; G. BOWERSOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

(18) *Brutus*, 29, 112; see A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 93; OGILVIE-RICHMOND, *op. cit.*, p. 128-9.

a wicked autocrat, and consigned to the flames. Again, the examples would appear to be conventional ones. However, to judge from the occasional sarcasm in the *Annals*, undiluted praise of Thrasea was not altogether congenial to Tacitus (19). Nor is the reference obviously consistent with the censure passed on *Stoicorum adrogantia* in the *Annals* (20) or the *inani iactatione libertatis* later in the *Agricola* (21).

«Biography gained prestige in the Imperial age for contradictory reasons. Biography was the natural form of telling the story of a Caesar. On the other hand, biography was a vehicle for unorthodox political and philosophic ideas». Such is the dichotomy proposed by Momigliano, and we may as well subjoin that scholar's final words on his subject: "it is pleasant to conclude by noting that Roman biography contributed to keeping emperors within the bounds of mortality" (22). Tacitus was a polished encomiast. Apart from the *Agricola*, he delivered the formal eulogy at the grand state funeral of Verginius Rufus: *laudatus est a consule Cornelio Tacito; nam hic supremus felicitatis eius cumulus accessit, laudator eloquentissimus* (23). His sole effort at biography did not have an emperor for subject. The language of the *Historiae* does not suggest that his promised treatment of Nerva and Trajan was going to be cast in the biographical mould. The inaugural discussion of biography and autobiography in the *Agricola* eschews any reference to imperial themes. He could have adduced the memoirs of Sulla, for instance, or the autobiography of Augustus. He did not. The silence may speak volumes.

Tacitus may have had unorthodox thoughts, but he was not the man to commit them to paper. And, as has been seen, he deprecated ostentatious display of extremist views. A middle course is steered. The laudation of Verginius Rufus was not in the same league as Pliny's *Panegyricus* upon Trajan. His biography of *Agricola* was a typical flourish of Roman piety. Politically, it was quite harmless. The difference between it and the politically motivated accounts of Paetus Thrasea and the like is emphasised by the anecdote concerning the dissuasion of his hero from un-Roman zeal for philosophy by his mother (24).

So there were various possibilities open to Roman biographers. It was not just a matter of extolling an emperor or puffing up some Stoic or other.

(19) See above all *Ann.*, XIV, 49: *Thræsea sueta firmitudine animi et ne gloria intercideret.*

(20) *Ann.*, XIV, 57.

(21) *Agric.*, 42, 3.

(22) *Op. cit.*, p. 99; 100.

(23) PLINY, *Ep.*, II. 1. 6.

(24) *Agric.*, 4, 3.

Relatives and friends, minor Roman administrators such as Agricola, *grammatici*, rhetoricians, poets, courtesans, all were grist to the mill. To a large extent, these are complementary aspects of biography, not rival ones. Still, it may not be just coincidence that Suetonius omits all mention of Agricola and Verginius Rufus in his imperial biographies (25).

Pliny is a useful guide to what was going on in biography in the Trajanic period. The epistolographer himself composed a *uita* of Cottius, the son of the luminous Vestricius Spurinna and Cottia, who had died young (26). Extracts from this were recited by Pliny at a public reading; and more than a single volume was being contemplated.

There is no need to be cold-hearted and deny any genuine sentiment here. The demands of Roman etiquette and *amicitia* do not automatically preclude real feeling; and Pliny was a man of warm nature and generous impulse. Nevertheless, he is in strict emulation of his uncle here. In the bibliography of the polymath's work, prepared by his nephew at the request of Baebius Macer, and arranged in chronological sequence, a *uita* of Pomponius Secundus occupies second place (27). The biography embraced two volumes, and was conceived as a work of homage: *a quo singulariter amatus hoc memoriae amici quasi debitum munus exsoluit*.

Like Varro, Plutarch, and Tacitus, the younger Pliny emphasises the connection between biography and *imagines*. He compares his memoir of Cottius to any representation of the deceased by sculptor or painter. But any such physical memorial is *fragilem et caducam*, whereas a biography is *immortalem* (28).

Perhaps it is disturbing that Pliny will defer to the mourning father's judgement of what items in the *uita* are *addenda commutanda omittenda*. There is a touch of the commissioned biographer (tantamount to the hired mourner) here. But Pliny's words may reflect nothing more sinister than formal courtesy; or, indeed, common decency.

However, when an enemy of Pliny on the scale of Aquilius Regulus goes in for this sort of pious commemoration, there is an abrupt change of tone. A letter to Catus Lepidus (*Ep.*, IV, 7) contains a sneering account of Regulus' mourning for his son. The man's intolerable *uis* has caused him to compose a *uita* and declaim it to a huge audience: *librum de uita eius recitauit; de uita*

(25) Thrasca Paetus, by contrast, is mentioned: *Nero*, 37, 1; *Dom.*, 10, 3.

(26) *Ep.*, III, 10; cf. *Ep.*, II, 7, for Cottius' death.

(27) *Ep.*, III, 5; A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 216 f.

(28) Cf. *Agric.*, 46, 3: *simulacra uultus imbecilla ac mortalia sunt*. Pliny (*Ep.*, II, 7, 3) states that Cottius had been granted the honour, rare for such a young man, of a public statue.

*pueri, recitavit tamen.* Copies of the memoir have been distributed throughout Italy and the provinces, and Regulus is arranging for public readings in the municipalities by expert declaimers. And, conforming to the pattern earlier discussed, he is having countless statues and portraits in all sorts of media made of the boy.

Pliny, of course, was hardly balanced on the subject of Regulus. His vicious account of what may have been quite sincere grief is to be compared to Tacitus' description of Nero's mourning for the death of his infant daughter<sup>(29)</sup>. Regulus was doing nothing out of the ordinary. Pliny has other examples of the industry. Claudius Pollio's merits are urged in a letter of recommendation (*Ep.*, VII, 31); one proof of them is the biography of Annius Bassus which he had published. There is also the more obscure case of Colonus and Pompeius Quintianus (*Ep.*, IX, 9). Pliny's witness is the best refutation of his claim that *plerique hactenus meminerint ut querantur*<sup>(30)</sup>.

Our own age exhibits the increase of an illogical fashion: biographies of the living, sometimes even of young subjects<sup>(31)</sup>. This type of biography is much less common in Rome. A notable exception is the *uita* of Augustus by Nicolaus of Damascus; but this has obviously to be treated as a political document<sup>(32)</sup>. As has Pliny's effusion on Trajan, of course. It is possible that Voconius Romanus was planning to issue a biography of Pliny himself, though the phrases used by Pliny to describe the project are vague<sup>(33)</sup>. As Sherwin-White suggests, Romanus may only have a literary letter in mind. There is another possibility. Romanus is gathering materials for a *uita* to be issued on Pliny's death. Advance preparation is not so much morbid as practical, as any newspaper sub-editor in charge of the obituary column would confirm.

The relative avoidance of biographies of the living is to be applauded. It may also have a bearing on the absence of any *uita* of Trajan in the Suetonian corpus. Which does not account for the omission of Nerva. An artistic reason is possible. Suetonius closed his imperial sequence with the death of a "tyrant" and a generalising tribute to the virtues of his immediate successors.

(29) *Ann.*, XV, 23.

(30) *Ep.*, VII, 31, 6.

(31) The prime example is perhaps HUNTER DAVIES, *The Beatles: the Authorised Biography* (London, 1968). I have also discovered that we have "biographies" of fictional characters, such as John Pearson's *Biography of James Bond*, London, 1973 — not to be confused with his earlier *Life of Ian Fleming*.

(32) For its date and purpose, and the relevant literature, see G. BOWERSOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 136-7.

(33) *Ep.*, IX, 28, 3; A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 510-11.

This finale is a studied balance to the dramatic opening, cited in the previous chapter, of the Vespasian.

Another artistic explanation will readily be thought of: the virtues of Nerva and Trajan did not provide suitable materials for chronicles of imperial depravity. That answer fails on two counts. First, there was scandalous material to hand. Dio Cassius was aware of stories about Trajan's addiction to strong drink and boys<sup>(34)</sup>. Suetonius himself took care to insert in the opening section of his *Domitian* the claim of some sources that Domitian had been debauched by Nerva. Second, the compilers of "chroniques scandaleuses" (though Suetonius was more than just that) did not disdain to handle "good" emperors. The authors (or author) of the *HA*, after all, included Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius in the imperial collection.

One can only speculate. Perhaps, and for whatever motive, Suetonius followed Tacitus in setting aside these reigns for his old age. Death may have prevented him from completing this final pair of biographies. It should again be borne in mind that the *HA* begins with Hadrian, not with Nerva or Trajan.

One thing is patent from Pliny's accounts of the literary life of the time: biographies of emperors were at a discount. Not that Pliny is a complete guide, nor always objective. We have seen his malicious account of Regulus' efforts to commemorate his son. And he had a vested interest in not boosting any encomia of Trajan (if there were any), because of his *Panegyricus*. But for all of that, his letters are an accurate general guide to the literary fashions. There is no allusion to any *uita* of the deified Nerva, either published or projected. Nor indeed to any sequences of imperial lives, in Latin or Greek. The letters to and about Suetonius do not so much as hint at any biographical activities. Which is of no significance, for Suetonius might not have had any such project in hand or mind at that period. Some allusion to Plutarch's set biographies of emperors from Augustus to Vitellius might, however, have been expected, for they were almost certainly finished before the assassination of Domitian<sup>(35)</sup>. Pliny was not averse to naming Greek men of letters; we hear of the oratorical Nicetes Sacerdos and Isaeus, also the philosopher Euphrates.

There are historians at work, and not just Cornelius Tacitus. But apparently no imperial biographers. This at once imparts a certain originality, even daring of sorts, to the project of Suetonius. For it was almost entirely opposed to current fashion. Biography was concerned with wicked emperors

(34) DIO, I.XVIII, 7, 4.

(35) See C. P. JONES, *Plutarch and Rome*, p. 72 f.; also his *Towards a chronology of Plutarch's works* in *JRS*, 56, 1966, p. 61 f.



and their victims, and with hagiographies of martyrs both Republican and imperial. Witness the activities of Gaius Fannius and Titinius Capito.

In a letter to Novius Maximus (*Ep.*, V, 5), Pliny confides his grief at the sudden death of Fannius. The deceased was a busy advocate, one reason why his *pulcherrimum opus* was left unfinished. His leisure moments were devoted to *exitus occisorum aut relegatorum a Nerone*; three volumes had been completed and published to acclaim. Pliny thought them *subtiles et diligentes et Latinos atque inter sermonem historiamque medios*.

The rest of the account is taken up with the dream which Fannius had had long ago, in which Nero appeared, read through the three volumes, and departed. There is nothing new to say about this, save to observe that Fannius composed or published no further volume between this premonition and his actual death. There has been a debate, ultimately sterile, as to whether Fannius entitled his work *De sceleribus Neronis* <sup>(36)</sup>.

Whatever his title, Fannius was clearly making use of the categorising approach to biography. Suetonius introduces the second part of his *Nero* under the subtitle *probris ac sceleribus eius de quibus dehinc dicam* <sup>(37)</sup>. The same procedure is followed in the *Caligula: hactenus quasi de principe, reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt* <sup>(38)</sup>. And also in the *Tiberius*, where the biographer undertakes to describe *cuncta uitia, de quibus singillatim ab exordio referam* <sup>(39)</sup>.

Too much should not be made of all this. The procedure is not so crude as is sometimes maintained, and is not inappropriate to assessments of complex personalities. Nor is it completely removed from the approach of Tacitus and Dio Cassius, both of whom liked to find points of degeneration in a reign and subdivide their narratives accordingly. Moreover, Suetonius has other, more subtle ways of arranging his materials, for which he is not always given due credit <sup>(40)</sup>.

Fannius will have been a partisan compiler. His very theme suggests as much, and the possibility that he was connected with Paetus Thrasea enhances the point <sup>(41)</sup>. There is no reason to doubt that Suetonius read his three volumes. Not that there is any overt allusion. But Fannius might, for instance,

(36) The issue derives from PLINY, *Ep.*, V, 5, 5: *primum librum quem de sceleribus eius ediderat*. Munzer proposed *De sceleribus Neronis* as the title from this. H. BARDON, *op. cit.*, 2, 208, rejects it; see A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

(37) *Nero*, 19, 3.

(38) *Cal.*, 22.

(39) *Tib.*, 42, 1.

(40) *Aug.*, 9; 61; *Dom.*, 10, 3.

(41) A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 320; SYME, *Tacitus*, p. 92.

be one of the *nec incertis auctoribus* adduced for the story of Nero's gloating inspection of the corpse of his mother (42). It should be noted, however, that Nero's liquidation of Thrasea is granted only six words in a register of victims (43).

A taste for *exitus* scenes is not the monopoly of biographers alone. Tacitus relished them mightily. So should any narrator worth his salt, given such grim themes. There is only one full-scale *exitus* scene in the *Nero* of Suetonius: that of the emperor himself. It is brilliantly contrived — and replete with illogical details (44). A touch of parody of the Fannian style?

Now Titinius Capito (45). The first we hear of this eminence from Pliny is that he has obtained imperial permission to erect a statue to Lucius Silanus in the forum. Is the emperor Nerva or Trajan? If the former, it could be grimly amusing. For Silanus was a victim of Nero; perhaps the younger L. Junius Silanus Torquatus, executed in the aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy. And who received signal honours, including a triumphal statue, from Nero for his role in suppressing the Pisonians? Cocceius Nerva! (46).

Capito had a sound career under Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan. At one stage, he was *ab epistulis*, which provokes obvious comparison with Suetonius. In his home, he kept *imagines* of Brutus, Cassius, and Cato. Also, and this is the umpteenth connection between *imagines* and biography, he *clarissimi cuiusque uitam egregiis carminibus exornat*.

These verses are almost certainly to be distinguished from Titinius' sequence of *exitus illustrium uirorum*, extracts from which were to be read by the author at a public reading Pliny felt he had to attend at all costs. Not just because of the literary fame of Titinius, but also in deference to his theme; for some of the descriptions were of men *carissimorum* to Pliny himself. It would appear that Titinius is working along the lines of Fannius here. He was interested in historiography; so much so that he was foolish enough to urge Pliny to try his hand at it.

Bardon thought that Titinius' verses were elegiac eulogies placed beneath actual portraits (47). It is more likely that he was following Varro and Atticus in compiling a sort of album of Republican dignitaries, comprising

(42) *Nero*, 34, 4; cf. TACITUS, *Ann.*, XIV, 9, for the reverse possibility.

(43) *Nero*, 37, 1: *Paeto Thraseae tristior et paedagogi uultus* (the reason for his condemnation); cf. *Dom.*, 10, 4.

(44) See the splendid analysis by TOWNEND, *Latin Biography*, p. 93 f.

(45) PLINY, *Ep.*, I, 17; V, 8; VIII, 12. For his career, *ILS* 1448; R. SYME, *Tacitus*, p. 92-3; A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 125.

(46) TACITUS, *Ann.*, XV, 72, 1.

(47) *Op. cit.*, 2, p. 221; criticised by A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 126.

illustrations and brief laudations in verse (48). Emulation of Varro at this time would be a striking prelude to the renaissance of interest in that scholar which is attested by Aulus Gellius and his scholarly circles.

Titinius Capito might be one example of renewed interest in the biographical techniques of Varro. Another is Suetonius Tranquillus, whose *De uiris illustribus* owed some of its inspiration and erudition to Varro's *De poetis* (49).

The above types of Biographies and biographers did not all suddenly appear, or re-appear, in that *rara temporum felicitate* of Nerva and Trajan. A glance at what was going on in the Julio-Claudian period is instructive (50). The elder Pliny's memoir of Pomponius Secundus has already been mentioned. Seneca, that prince of Stoic hypocrites, produced a *uita patris*. Taken in conjunction with the maliciously-turned eulogy upon Claudius which he prepared for Nero (51), and not forgetting the traditional ascription to him of the *Apocolocyntosis* (52), this act of filial piety suggests equal skills in flattery and denunciation. A logical combination, to be sure, and far from unique. Tacitus is a fine example of these dual talents.

In the *Dialogus* (53), Julius Secundus is commended for his *uita* of Julius Africanus, not least because his effort had made men hope for more of the same. It is certain that this particular taste on the part of the reading public was met.

A panegyric upon Cato Uticensis by Paetus Thrasea will have deceived no one (54). The very theme connotes a political motivation. And the death of Cato, however dressed up in the style of Plato's *Phaedo* it may have been by Thrasea, must have provided a fine *exitus* sequence.

Sinister construction could be placed upon a pious memoir. When Antistius Sosianus stole the papers of P. Anteius from the desk of Pammenes the astrologer, they were found to include materials *quae de ortu uitaeque Ostorii Scapulae composita erant* (55). The pair were denounced, and both committed suicide; their deaths afford brief but effective *exitus* vignettes.

(48) NEPOS, *Atticus*, 18. 5-6; PLINY, *NH*, XXXV, 11. See A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 96-8; E. M. JENKINSON, *art. cit.*, p. 709.

(49) See FUNAIOLI, *GRF*, 314-19, for fragments of Varro's *De poetis*; A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 96-7, for literature on the subject.

(50) Consult the survey of: H. BARDON, *op. cit.*, 2, p. 169 f.

(51) TACITUS, *Ann.*, XIII, 3.

(52) For arguments against this ascription, see my article in *Phoenix*, 18, 1964, p. 39-48.

(53) *Dial.*, 14.

(54) PLUTARCH, *Cato minor*, 37.

(55) TACITUS, *Ann.*, XVI, 14.

That it should have been Antistius Sosianus who encompassed their ruin is morbidly significant. For this turbulent and unsavoury character had been one of the first two victims of *maiestas* trials under Nero. His offence had been to compose *probrosa carmina* against Nero and recite them at a banquet hosted by a man who tried to save him by giving evidence to the effect that he had heard nothing. That man was Ostorius Scapula. And the trial of Sosianus elicited a demonstration of the *libertas* of Pactus Thræsea<sup>(56)</sup>. These events demonstrate the interplay between literature, politics, and vendetta: eulogy and incrimination can be equally fatal to their practitioners<sup>(57)</sup>.

Again, there does not appear to have been any particular enthusiasm for imperial biography on the part of Roman authors. This is explicable on various levels. Simple fear of saying the wrong thing was an obvious factor. Who could predict an emperor's reaction to the memory of his predecessor? Imperial caprice could be terrifyingly retrospective.

Some emperors continued the tradition of autobiography. The almost total loss of imperial memoirs is bitterly to be regretted<sup>(58)</sup>. For men of power are not incapable of telling the truth; their versions of events are urgently required as a corrective to Tacitus — and to Suetonius. Perhaps the very existence of these helped to keep Roman imperial biography at a minimum. The literary silence may connote fear — and contempt.

We must not be misled by documents such as the *Panegyricus* of Pliny. Formal eulogy is slowly coming to be taken less seriously by intellectuals, both Greek and Roman. Seneca's obituary for Claudius, parts of which reduced all hearers to laughter, is an intimation of changing attitudes. Another manifestation, significantly reaching its apogee in the midst of Antonine virtues, was the growing popularity of adoxographical exercises. Mock panegyrics were dashed off, not just by sardonic intellectuals such as Lucian, but also by trained courtiers and polished encomiasts of the stamp of Fronto<sup>(59)</sup>. In a society where genuine respect had to co-exist with venal praises, these exercises were rather more than literary squibs or the ancient equivalent to the "New Statesman" competitions: they were emotional safety-valves.

(56) *Ann.*, XIV, 48-9; see my analysis of this affair in *Parola del Passato*, 117, 1967, p. 435 f.

(57) Notice the companion case to Sosianus, that of Fabricius Veiento (*Ann.*, XIV, 50) *Cave H. BARDON. op. cit.*, 2, p. 170, n. 11, on this; see B. BALDWIN, *loc. cit.*

(58) The *Res gestae* of Augustus is not relevant here: his thirteen books *De Vita sua* (Suetonius, *Aug.*, 85. 1) most assuredly are!

(59) See A. S. PEASE, *Things without Honor* in *CP*, 21, 1926, p. 27-42.

Given all this, it is natural that biography should evolve from its original connection with *imagines* and funereal eulogy into a more flexible genre. A *uita* can no longer be presumed to have been a laudation. The hatchet-job, so popular in our own age, had arrived. The subject of a biography need not be a paragon. An early, faltering venture into this area is the *Alcibiades* of Cornelius Nepos.

But the extension of biography does not harden into a crude dichotomy of good men or bad. Nepos' *Alcibiades* begins by insisting on the balance of qualities in his subject, and terminates with an effort at complete vindication<sup>(60)</sup>. The *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch demonstrate this balancing technique on a much superior level to that of Nepos. So do the imperial biographies of Suetonius. As was seen earlier, his *Caligula* and *Nero* present classifications of virtues and vices, good deeds and bad. More to the point, there was even some attempt by the biographer to give Domitian his due. It is notable that the transition in this *uita* is made much more quietly than in the *Caligula* or *Nero*. The smooth and swift movement from Domitian's mercy and integrity to his cruelty and avarice is carefully thought out to give the requisite effect.

We do not know if Suetonius ever pronounced a formal eulogy or composed a pious *uita* to the memory of a relative or friend. Or a biography, apart from the *Caesars*, which might have been construed as a political pamphlet. Of his known lost works, the volume *De regibus* may be presumed to have been the usual compendium of fact, conjecture, and fiction, which characterised all efforts on this theme. Of greater relevance is the item he wrote on the *Politeia* of Cicero. This is very likely to have contained biographical material in apologetic style. For Suetonius was interested in Cicero, not only as a source for the biographies of Caesar and Augustus, but as a theme for controversy. He knew the emperor Claudius' defence of Cicero against the attacks of Asinius Gallus, and commends its erudition<sup>(61)</sup>. Claudius was not the first *princeps* to put in a word for the orator; Plutarch closes his biography of Cicero with an anecdote in which the learning and the patriotism of Marcus Tullius Cicero are praised by Augustus. The orator's name did not attain the symbolic power of a Cato or a Brutus; to commend him in the imperial period was never dangerous.

A brief scrutiny of the work of Varro, Santra, Hyginus, and Nepos will further assist the creation of a full perspective for the biographical efforts of

(60) A Peripatetic technique; see E. M. JENKINSON, *art. cit.*, p. 710.

(61) *Claud.*, 41, 3; see F. MILLAR, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964, p. 46 f.

Suetonius and his contemporaries. The continuity of tradition between the *Imagines* and *De poetis* of Varro and the work of Titinius Capito has already been adumbrated. It is noteworthy that Varro also composed three volumes of autobiography<sup>(62)</sup>. The *Imagines*, according to Aulus Gellius<sup>(63)</sup>, contained such topics as the relative chronology of Homer and Hesiod. There was also an obsessional concern for the number seven, so much so that even Gellius, who normally worshipped at the shrine of Varronian scholarship, found some of his arguments on this theme to be *frigidiuscula*. Gellius also made use of the *De poetis* for points concerning Plautus, Ennius, and Naevius<sup>(64)</sup>. It may or may not be significant that in the case of both the *Imagines* and the *De poetis* only the first book is cited by Gellius.

Santra is an elusive figure<sup>(65)</sup>. Martial dubbed him *salebrosum*, a worthy author for *lectores tetrici*<sup>(66)</sup>. Gellius cites him but once, as an authority on language<sup>(67)</sup>. The two references in Suetonius to his work on Terence and Curtius Nicias<sup>(68)</sup> do not make it clear just what form Santra's contributions took: a general *De uiris illustribus* or a more limited *De poetis* seem equally possible. Perhaps both.

C. Julius Hyginus is awarded a brief notice by Suetonius<sup>(69)</sup>. Nothing is said against him, but it is notable that nothing whatsoever is said about his writings. Contempt on the part of Suetonius? Hyginus' work as a *grammaticus* is commended by Aulus Gellius, as is his knowledge of pontifical law<sup>(70)</sup>. He wrote at least six volumes *De uita rebusque inlustrium uirorum*; Gellius' two references to them indicate that Hyginus liked edifying tales about luminaries of the earlier Republican period<sup>(71)</sup>.

Cornelius Nepos was as versatile and prolific as the best or worst of them<sup>(72)</sup>. He wrote verses of sorts; in alluding to them, Pliny intriguingly couples his name with that of Vergil<sup>(73)</sup>. There was also a geographical treatise under his name. Some volumes of *Exempla* are a half-way mark

(62) FUNAIOLI, *GRF*, p. 179 f.; A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 96-7.

(63) *NA*, III, 10; III, 11.

(64) *NA*, I, 24, 3; XVII, 21, 43 and 45; cf. XV, 24, for use of the *De poetis* of Vulcacius Sedigitus.

(65) FUNAIOLI, *GRF*, p. 384 f.; H. BARDON, *op. cit.*, I, p. 297-8.

(66) *Epigr.*, XI, 2, 6; cf. QUINTILIAN, XI, 2, 46, for *resistens ac salebroso oratio*.

(67) *NA*, VII, 15, 5.

(68) *Vita Terenti*, 4; *De gramm.*, 14.

(69) *De gramm.*, 20; FUNAIOLI, *GRF*, p. 525 f.

(70) *NA*, I, 21, 2; XVI, 6, 14.

(71) *NA*, I, 14, 1 (Fabricius and Samnite bribes); VI, 1, 2 (on Scipio Africanus *maior*).

(72) See E. M. JENKINSON, *op. cit.*, p. 703 f.; A. MOMIGLIANO, *op. cit.*, p. 97-98.

(73) *Ep.*, V, 3, 6.

between the works cited and his sixteen volumes of *De uiris illustribus*; not forgetting his separate biographies of Cato and Cicero. Suetonius cites him several times as a source in his *De uiris illustribus*, with apparent approval; and once as an authority for the sobriety of Octavian<sup>(74)</sup>. Aulus Gellius calls Nepos *rerum memoriae non indiligens*, but follows this up with an entire article on the false date for Cicero's *Pro Roscio Amerino* given in the first book of his biography of Cicero<sup>(75)</sup>. By contrast, an item concerning the elder Cato is recorded without comment from the thirteenth book of the *De uiris illustribus*<sup>(76)</sup>.

The quartet of Rome's earliest biographers had versatility and erudition in common. It was a tradition which was to be continued. Of the relevant Greek writers, Nicolaus of Damascus stands out along with Plutarch. On the Roman side, we see the elder Pliny, Titinius Capito, and Suetonius Tranquillus.

There is no reason to think that these polymaths regarded biography as "cheap and easy", or as a relaxation from their major work. The fragmented ruins and mere titles which survive make it all too easy to undervalue the amount of work which had to be put into the production of *uitae*. The differences between biography and the writing of history also tend to be exaggerated. Within, say, the *Annals* of Tacitus, there is many a biography in miniature. As also in such compendia as the *Noctes Atticae* of Gellius and the popular genre of *exempla* collections.

Another aspect of polymath biographers at Rome was their willingness to see beyond national frontiers. Both Varro and Nepos were concerned to compare Greek and Roman achievements. The excellent discussion of this by Momigliano goes rather too far in crediting this "new dimension" to Cornelius Nepos<sup>(77)</sup>. The *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon was surely an early example. And the principle involved was at least as old as Herodotus.

There is no evidence that Suetonius practised the biographical technique of comparing Greeks and Romans. Infamous Hellenic ladies, however, will have been prominent in his accounts of celebrated strumpets. And he wrote a monograph on Greek games and pastimes, perhaps intended as a companion piece to the two books on Roman festivals and games which were instantaneously successful<sup>(78)</sup>.

(74) *Vita Terenti*, 1, 3; *De gramm.*, 4; *De rhet.*, 3; *Aug.*, 77; cf. *JC*, 55, 1.

(75) *NA*, XV, 28.

(76) *NA*, XI, 8, 5.

(77) *Op. cit.*, p. 97-98.

(78) *NA*, IX, 7, 3; XV, 4, 4.

No one can doubt that Suetonius consulted Greek sources for his imperial biographies. He mentions one or two by name or title : the *Theologumena* of Asclepias of Mendes <sup>(79)</sup>, and an anonymous pasquinade on the elevation of fools which was directed against Claudius <sup>(80)</sup>. *Nonnulli Graecorum* are adduced on the matter of Caesarion's physical resemblances to Caesar <sup>(81)</sup>. But there is no overt reference, in praise or censure, to either Nicolaus of Damascus or Plutarch.

Nicolaus combined the traditions <sup>(82)</sup>. An impressive public career, friendship with the first *princeps* of Rome, polymath scholarship, and a busy pen. He wrote his own memoirs, and a biography of Augustus' early career. This latter was surely of value to Suetonius as a document, and congenial to him in its attitude.

There need not be anything signal or suspicious about the omission of Nicolaus' name. A parallel is easy to produce : the neglect by Suetonius of Caesar's *commentarii* as a source for the dictator's career. When we turn to Plutarch, however, things may become rather more murky.

Plutarch's imperial biographies extended from Augustus to Vitellius <sup>(83)</sup> ; as is well known, only the *Galba* and *Otho* survive. It may well be that they were completed before the death of Domitian. This, however, is only an inference from one of the two notable differences between Plutarch's sequence of *Caesars* and that of Suetonius : the exclusion of the Flavian dynasty. The other matter separating them is the treatment of Julius Caesar. Plutarch coupled him with Alexander in the *Parallel Lives*, whereas Suetonius places him at the forefront of his *Caesars*. Plutarch's procedure appears logical enough to us, and it is firmly within the context of the debates on the respective merits of Alexander and Rome, and the taste of emperors for comparison with the great Macedonian. Suetonius acknowledges this with his anecdote of Caesar before Alexander's statue in Gades <sup>(84)</sup>.

Yet it may be the case that Suetonius' inclusion of Caesar in his imperial sequence was intended as a studied rebuke to Plutarch. By itself, the simple difference of procedure might mean little or nothing. But there are other signs of Suetonian disapproval of his Greek precursor.

(79) *Aug.*, 94, 3.

(80) *Claud.*, 38, 3.

(81) *JC*, 52, 2.

(82) See G. BOWERSOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 136 f.

(83) See C. P. JONES, *Plutarch and Rome*, p. 72 f.

(84) *JC*, 7, 1.



There is the matter of their respective attitudes to the Flavians. Plutarch's condemnation of Domitianic vices occasions no surprise, of course<sup>(85)</sup>. But he is hardly less sparing of the cruelty and unhappiness of Vespasian<sup>(86)</sup>. His judgement is remarkably different from the Roman opinions of the first Flavian. Even Tacitus was willing to go on record with a warm compliment<sup>(87)</sup>. Suetonius' enthusiastic exordium to his *Vespasian* has already been cited; elsewhere, he stresses that Vespasian was the reverse of cruel, and affirms that the emperor's only vice was *pecuniae cupiditas*<sup>(88)</sup>.

Thus, there may be a polemical motivation to the last three imperial biographies of Suetonius. Or at least to the accounts of Vespasian and Titus, whose *uitae* the Greek biographer had disdained to record. And we have seen that Suetonius is not even unsparingly hostile to Domitian, though in that he is as different from Tacitus as from Plutarch.

Naturally, there were other reasons for Suetonius to go beyond the Plutarchean limits. The Flavian period could hardly be ignored by the Roman writers of the Trajanic and early Hadrianic eras. Vespasian, in particular, had to be treated. Thus, the *Historiae* of Tacitus; also his *Dialogus*, and certain relevant areas of the *Agricola*. Nor will the particular narratives of Josephus be overlooked, although Suetonius tries to, with his one cryptic reference to that slippery character<sup>(89)</sup>. Also, the biographer appears to have been a convinced supporter of the principate. To end an imperial sequence with Nero, or with Vitellius, would leave the wrong impression. Domitian, of course, was no fitting conclusion to the Flavian record, but the impact is mitigated by the concluding sentence, with its anecdote of Domitian's prophetic dream of enhanced Roman prosperity, rounded off by the compliment to the *abstinentia* and *moderatio* of his successors.

Another possible sign of a Suetonian desire to redress the version of Plutarch may be given by their respective accounts of Otho. Key sources cited by Plutarch include Julius Secundus, rhetorician and secretary to Otho, and his friend and "patron", Mestrius Florus<sup>(90)</sup>. Suetonius ignores these, adducing only his own father as a source for Otho's views on civil war, and *quidam tradiderunt* for Otho's use of Nero's name<sup>(91)</sup>.

(85) See, e.g., *Publicola*, 15, 3-6; C. L. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 25, for references and discussion.

(86) *Amat.*, 771 C; *Publicola*, 15, 2.

(87) *Hist.*, 1, 50: *solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est.*

(88) *Vesp.*, 15-16.

(89) *Vesp.*, 5, 6: *unus ex nobilibus captivus Iosephus* (he prophesies Vespasian's principate).

(90) *Otho*, 9, 3; 14, 1; see C. P. JONES, *passim*, on these.

(91) *Otho*, 10, 1; 7, 1.

There is something else. Suetonius has one reference to Mestrius Florus. It is no compliment, but an anecdote involving his pedantry on the pronunciation of *plaustra*, and Vespasian's comic revenge on *Mestrium Florum consularem* for lecturing him on this<sup>(92)</sup>. The item could have been included as a deliberate mockery of Plutarch and his circle.

Another item might be utilised. It concerns the treatment of that celebrated rascal, Tigellinus. In Tacitus, he is one of the great villains of Nero's reign, and is awarded a marvellously unsavoury *exitus* scene in the *Historiae*<sup>(93)</sup>. Plutarch has the same concentration, devoting an early section of his *Otho* to the popularity of that emperor's punishment of him<sup>(94)</sup>. Suetonius, by contrast, accords Tigellinus only one passing reference. He is coupled with Halotus in the *Galba* as one of Nero's two worst creatures<sup>(95)</sup>. But the infamous prefect is omitted altogether from the *Nero*, which is surely striking, and his demise under Otho is likewise passed over.

The imperial lives of Suetonius may, in part, have been inspired by distaste for the Plutarchean versions. Let two final observations be made. First, it is at least possible that Suetonius' accounts of famous whores contained elements of parody of, and retort to, such essays as the *Mulierum Virtutes* of Plutarch. Second, Aulus Gellius, a man of different career but similar tastes in scholarship to Suetonius', mentions Plutarch frequently; sometimes with approval, occasionally in criticism, but with no reference whatsoever to any of the biographies, either the imperial sequence or the *Parallel Lives*<sup>(96)</sup>.

The above suggestions do not constrain belief in any violent vendetta, literary and/or personal, between the two polymath biographers. There were always some Romans ready with anti-Hellenic sentiments (the reverse is at least equally true). In his summing up of Arminius, Tacitus complained of his omission *Graecorum annalibus qui sua tantum mirantur*<sup>(97)</sup>, although it is not always pointed out that this is balanced by the lament that Roman writers were *recentium incuriosi*. If Tacitus was hinting at Plutarch's biographies, the

(92) *Vesp.*, 22.

(93) *Hist.*, I, 72.

(94) *Otho*, 2.

(95) *Galba*, 15, 2.

(96) *NA*, I, 1, 1; I, 3, 31; I, 26, 1; II, 8, 1; II, 9, 1; III, 5, 1; III, 6, 1; IV, 11, 11; XI, 16, 2; XV, 10, 1; XX, 8, 7. Plutarch is once acclaimed as *homo in disciplinis graui auctoritate* (IV, 11, 11); by contrast, two articles (II, 8, 1; II, 9, 1) are devoted to Plutarch's unfair criticism of Epicurus. It is true that Favorinus of Arelate would be a personal link between Plutarch and Gellius. But the notion of R. H. BARROW, *Plutarch and his Times*, London, 1967, p. 174, that Gellius set out to make himself known as the Roman Plutarch is out of court.

(97) *Ann.*, II, 88.

criticism is foolishly inappropriate<sup>(98)</sup>. Anyway, Suetonius does not mention Arminius either, though he did not lack for opportune contexts. Another writer who liked to criticise his contemporary Greek historians was Josephus<sup>(99)</sup>.

Suetonius need not be regarded as anti-Greek. In the circle of Pliny, philhellenism was the rule, although it has to be admitted that Tacitus complicates that generalisation somewhat<sup>(100)</sup>. But he was human. The imperial biographies of Plutarch were his main competition. And in such weighty matters as the assessment of the Flavians, there was scope for differences of opinion both drastic and honest.

One little item of some relevance may be slipped in here. Momigliano claims that the Romans did not have to fear that their widows would write their biographies<sup>(101)</sup>. This is perhaps a shade too final. There were literary ladies around. The wife of Pliny's friend, Pompeius Saturninus, can be adduced<sup>(102)</sup>. A certain Pamphila composed a *Commentarium* in at least twenty-nine books; it is twice cited by Aulus Gellius as a source for biographical information about Greeks<sup>(103)</sup>. More to the point was the mother of Nero, who *uitam suam et casus suorum posteris memorauit*<sup>(104)</sup>. Tacitus exploited her memoir(s) for a detail *a scriptoribus annalium non traditum*. The female voice was not altogether absent from the Roman biographical record.

*Quorum per plenam seriem Suetonius olim/nomina res gestas uitamque obitumque peregit.* Thus is the biographer's achievement summed up by Ausonius in the prefatory lines of his tedious verses upon the Caesars from Julius to Elagabalus<sup>(105)</sup>. There was rather more to Suetonius than that; but the judgement can stand as an introduction to any analysis of his sources, methods, and opinions. A fitter tribute, perhaps, is the message implied in Ausonius' collection of verses: for his age, *the* imperial biographer was Suetonius Tranquillus.

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(98) See G. BOWERSOCK, *op. cit.*, p. 109, n. 2, on this (citing R. SYME in *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, 72, 1963, p. 14).

(99) *BJ, praef.* I; IV, 496; see E. L. BOWIE, *art. cit.*, p. 15.

(100) *Ep.*, VIII, 24; A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE, p. 477-8.

(101) Citing the delicious lament by Edmund Gosse: "The Widow is the worst of all the diseases of biography. She is the triumph of the unfitest."

(102) *Ep.*, I, 16, 6.

(103) *NA*, XV, 17, 3 (Alcibiades); XV, 23, 2 (Hellenicus, Herodotus, and Thucydides).

(104) TACITUS, *Ann.*, IV, 53, 3.

(105) Ausonius' collection of verses at least helps to prove that Suetonius wrote no biographies of emperors after Domitian: from Nerva on, the Ausonian sequence is subtitled *De Caesaribus post Tranquillum*.

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