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Introduction

Romans on Temporality: Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

Romans on Temporality: Past, Present, and Future

Rosa Rita Marchese and Fabio Tutrone

For a journal focusing on the field of ontological inquiry, the conceptualization of time is a basic (if not canonical) theme. When forming an image of reality on the basis of their immediate perception, human beings are led to attach an essential importance to the strictly interrelated notions of *time* and *space* – notions variously overlapping in ancient languages. The temptation to ascribe a universal, objective value to these concepts is often overwhelming, especially in the Western tradition and under the influence of positivistic approaches. However, when we decided to devote this special issue of *Epekeina* to the Roman representation of time, we shared a strong belief in the culturally and socially embedded nature of time patterns. We embraced the increasingly common assumption – constantly corroborated by both the natural and social sciences – that «human social life forms part of a whole time rather than being, dualistically, in opposition to natural time».¹ Indeed, it is not only that, as Durkheim famously claimed, all time is social time.² Rather, every society operates in a complex network of physical and cultural elements, with multiple dimensions and mutual implications.

When we launched our call for papers, we were thus particularly interested in the exploration of diverging (or even conflicting) paradigms throughout the many-sided corpus of Latin literature. We invited contributors to investigate the Roman authors' continuous re-negotiation of traditional forms of temporality, from the archaic age to late antiquity, paying special attention to the central connection between time patterns and ethical values. No doubt, one of the most striking and influential structures of thought emerging from Rome's literary heritage is the experience of time as an intrinsically *moral* object. Before its understanding as a physical entity, and far different from its seg-

1. Cf. BYRNE and CALLAGHAN 2013, 142. For a path-breaking critique of the classical dichotomy between *natural* and *social* time see ADAM 1990.

2. DURKHEIM 1915, 10-11.

mentation and measurement, time appeared to the Romans – at least to those who were privileged to write down and elaborate their views – as a dynamic component of moral judgement. In several respects, the transition from time as a perceived phenomenon to its various interpretations in terms of ideological temporality was instantaneous. And it is wise to assume that such a direct transition reflects, more generally, a fundamental tendency of human mind and cultures, for, as Maurizio Bettini pointed out, «time, in short, is an investment on the part of culture». Without man’s linguistic codifications, which actualize different strategies of “cultural investment”, time would even be meaningless and uninteresting.³

Yet, while recognizing the influence of underlying cultural beliefs which date back to the earliest stages of Rome’s social evolution – what contemporary semiotics would define as a system of *cultural isotopies*⁴ – the contributions collected in the present volume emphasize the specificities of individual authors, ages, and contexts. As editors, we have not been afraid of the inevitable element of thematic dispersion that this choice entailed, since our original project deliberately avoided any imposition of a monolithic interpretation of Roman culture. In his recent discussion of «the patterns that the Romans imposed to the time of the city and the empire», Denis Feeney rightly claimed that a unitary, holistic reading of Rome’s temporal worldview (such as the one that a mechanical adoption of Lévi-Strauss’ method might suggest) is bound to present an inadequate picture.⁵ It is indeed true that «we cannot label one culture cyclical, another linear, because most people perceive time in different ways according to their context or situation, with the result that any one culture is characterized by a range of different perceptions of time».⁶ The fact that certain Latin

3. See the insightful discussion of BETTINI 1991, Ch. 14.

4. For the semiotic notion of isotopy, a term borrowed from the realm of physics to describe the iterativity and homogeneity of certain human discourses, see GERSH 1996, 69-74, recalling the lesson of scholars like Greimas and Eco.

5. FEENEY 2007, 2-4. This is especially noteworthy in light of the enduring relevance of Rome’s central time machine – the so-called Julian calendar – with its ramified network of religious and political meanings. See now also SALZMAN 2013.

6. MÖLLER and LURAGHI 1995, 6-7. The multiplicity of ancient temporal patterns and its changing echo throughout the Western tradition have been recently reassessed in LIANERI 2011, a collection of studies paying tribute to the groundbreaking efforts

writers put special emphasis on cyclical recurrence does not contradict the progressive faith shown by other authors – or by the very same authors in different contexts.⁷ What traditional philology often takes as a sign of “inconsistency” (occasionally eliminated by means of textual emendations and deletions) should rather be seen as the expression of a world in which common beliefs could readily be adjusted, refashioned, or marginalized.

Among the cultural isotopies identified by our contributors at the border between ethics, history and literature, one occupies the foreground: the problem of evil and its relationship to the flow of time. Roman intellectuals are commonly depicted as committed to a distinctive form of moralistic pessimism. The well-known exclamation *O tempora, o mores!*⁸ has grown into a supposedly quintessential slogan of Latin cultural nostalgia, an attitude recognized in Cicero’s and Salust’s comments on the decline of the Republic as well as in Lucan’s gloomy epic and Pliny the Elder’s complaints about the decline of science. At the same time, Roman authors are credited with being the first to envisage a return of the Golden Age, that is, a revival of mankind’s original blessedness in a future of peace and prosperity.⁹ Instead of drawing a radical distinction between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” writers, or singling out each strain of thought as an intellectually discrete phenomenon, the present volume points to the coexistence of traditionalist and future-oriented approaches – of excitement and blame, dreams and polemics – within representative authors and texts.

On the whole, it is reasonable to assume that, from the Republican period onward, Roman culture engaged in a multifaceted elaboration of older models, which emphasized the importance of generational

of Arnaldo Momigliano (see e.g. MOMIGLIANO 1966).

7. A case in point is Seneca’s much-discussed attitude, taken into account by TUTRONE in this volume. One of the most well-known interpretations of Seneca’s faith in progress (and in the Golden Age at the same time) is that of MOTTO 1993.

8. Cicero, *Cat.* 1.2.

9. Admittedly, while the Golden Age (or, more properly, Golden Race) Myth was deep-rooted in Greek folklore and immortalized by Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (106-201), Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue* came to envision a return to primitive happiness, thus opening the way for a long-lasting tradition of paligenetic expectations. See now WALLACE-HADRILL 2004, and for a classical treatment of the ancient Myth of Ages, GATZ 1967.

continuity while creatively coping with contemporary permutations. To be sure, the Romans were accustomed to looking back when seeking solutions, since the ancestors' moral wisdom (the celebrated *mos maiorum*) was regarded as a repository of everlasting answers. As Bettini has shown in great detail, even on a linguistic level the reality of "before" (*ante* or *prae*) had a special preeminence for the Romans.¹⁰ But the heritage of the *maiores* did not appear as a fixed and easily discernable set of thoughts, to be applied automatically in accordance with each situation's needs. Rather, it was of matter of primary importance to recognize and show to the other members of the community which specific behavior mirrored the *true* wisdom of the ancients – an inherently subjective and controversial undertaking.¹¹ Rome's glorious past, frequently recalled in literary and political discourses, did not emerge as a mere object of nostalgic desire, but underwent a continuous process of re-use which was, at the same time, a re-writing for the sake of the future.

This particular point is analyzed in the first chapter of the collection, with special reference to that eminent specialist in Roman cult and tradition, the first century BC antiquarian Varro of Reate. Irene Leonardis focuses on an often neglected part of Varro's production, surviving only in scattered fragments, the *Saturae Menippeae*. Through a close reading of significant satires like the *Sexagesis*, the *Sesqueulixes* and the *Manius*, Leonardis throws light on what can be legitimately called «an anthropological reflection about time and mankind's perception of changes». Far from being a cataloguer of old-fashioned notions, Varro stands out as an actively engaged writer, who makes use of deep-rooted conventions (such as the wide-spread idea that «time is money») in order to rebuild Rome's social identity. By artificially creating a biographical distance between his characters and late Republican Rome, Varro emphasizes the paradigmatic value of ancient customs

10. Cf. BETTINI 1991, 113-181.

11. A telling example is provided by Caesar's and Cato's disagreement about the punishment of the Catilinarians as reported by Sallust, *Cat.* 51-52. The episode, with its deliberately conflicting use of ancestral memories, is suitably analyzed by SEIDER in this volume. Further relevant evidence comes, for instance, from the "plastic" use of previous models made by the characters of Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*: see RUTLEDGE 2012.

and beliefs – the heritage monumentalized in the *Antiquitates Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum* – with the declared purpose of transforming the present. As Leonardis puts it, the typically Varronian tendency to ruminate upon antiquity (*ruminari antiquitates*) is ultimately intended to take «a step back towards the future», since in Varro’s view only a conscious revitalization of ancient knowledge can lay the foundations of Rome’s continuing prosperity.

At various points in her survey, Leonardis remarks on the vivid interest shown by late Republican intellectuals in the rediscovery of primitive wisdom. A similar picture is clearly consistent with several recent investigations into the development of post-Hellenistic literature and philosophy.¹² To all appearances, the first century BC marked a crucial phase in the construction of what the later Western tradition considered «the classical cult of the past», when, in the turbulent years of the civil wars, an entire community of writers, poets and philosophers devoted its efforts to rescue a (seemingly lost) sense of humanity, religion, and sociability.¹³

An especially prominent role in this cultural environment is played by Cicero, mentioned by Leonardis herself as a basic point of reference. The second chapter of the present collection is mainly dedicated to Cicero’s discussion of Roman socio-political history in Book 2 of *De Officiis*. Alice Accardi provides a dense contextualization of Cicero’s remarks on the value of justice and benefit-exchanges (2.26-30), showing how the author’s harmonization of Stoic tenets and Latin models entails a reinterpretation of the history of Roman power. Again, the positive essence of the past is sharply contrasted with contemporary failures and abuses, for Cicero connects the relinquishing of traditional patterns of *beneficentia* with the rise of civic discord. Like other recent interpreters, however, Accardi points out that the *De Officiis* aims

12. See especially BOYS-STONES 2001, and for the representative case of Varro’s theological thought VAN NUFFELEN 2011. Useful insights had already been offered by MOATTI 1997 in her analysis of late Republican rationalism.

13. Of course, the belief that true wisdom can solely be recovered through a patient and methodical investigation of the remains of the past is much more specific than a general worship (or nostalgia) of previous ages. Emotionally and intellectually engaging reconstructions of the past can indeed be found in Greek literature since the archaic period: see MARINCOLA, LEWELLYN-JONES, and MACIVER 2012.

at using the past as a mine of feasible strategies.¹⁴ Even in the dark autumn of 44 BC, Cicero believed that pivotal cultural elements of the Republic (*beneficium, iustitia, imperium*) could be employed for a creative rebuilding. In order to cast light on the wide-ranging system of beliefs that Cicero variously reworked, Accardi takes into account other texts of the late Republican and the Augustan age (Sallust's "archaeology" in *The War with Catiline*, Caesar's *Commentaries*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Cicero's own *Letters to Atticus*). At end of this survey, the reader is left with the impression that Roman society relied on a strikingly consistent, and at the same highly malleable, network of values – for even if time was expected to flow, people were thought of as acting (and reacting) in a long-term anthropological framework.

Accardi's reference to Sallust's overview of Roman history (*Cat.* 5.9-13) serves as prelude to a core section of the volume which discusses in detail both *The War with Jugurtha* and *The War with Catiline*. In several respects, our contributors agree in attaching foundational importance to Sallust's controversial reflection on memory, time, and the morality of history. First, however, Francesco Staderini's chapter reminds us of a major point noted at the beginning of this introduction, namely the multi-focal nature of the Roman conceptualization of time. During the same period in which Varro and Cicero attempted to harmonize Greek erudition with Latin ideals for the sake of future generations, a brilliant didactic poet, Titus Lucretius Carus, called for a conversion to Epicurus' gospel and its anti-providential reading of history. Staderini offers a comprehensive reassessment of Lucretius' much-discussed *Kulturenstehungslehre*, an account of the origin and development of culture which overtly clashed with Rome's religious and state-centered view of time. It is not only that the Epicureans followed a special calendar, with common meals, festivals and anniversaries.¹⁵ After all, even the reformer of the official calendar, Julius Caesar, was said to have a fondness for Epicureanism. Indeed, Lucretius' enthusiastic poem exhorted Romans to reject any form of teleological temporality, leaving

14. See PICONE and MARCHESE 2012.

15. See CLAY 1998, 62-104. Notably, the adherence to such an "internal" time order did not prevent Epicurus' disciples from taking part in civic happenings and festivities: see Philodemus, *Piet.* 1.790-797; 877-896; 1849-1852, and the observations of ASMIS 2004, 135.

no room for the sacralization of political deeds and historical events. In the radical exposition of *De Rerum Natura*, human *res gestae* are deliberately assimilated to the transient reality of natural phenomena, and in accordance with Epicurean philosophy time is accorded a weak ontological status¹⁶ As Staderini remarks, Lucretius does not hesitate to give absolute priority to what he considers the most extraordinary of the arts discovered by mankind, that is – *ça va sans dire*– Epicurus’ therapeutic philosophy. Whereas Roman savants based their chronologies on politically eminent facts such the foundation of the *Urbs* or the expulsion of Tarquin, Lucretius conceives of history as a wholly accidental movement marked by Epicurus’ revelation. His various allusions to contemporary society reveal that such a critical message was intended to transform the Roman readers’ mentality.

For those who did not accept Lucretius’ invitation to join Epicurus’ Garden and reset their cultural coordinates, the times of the late Republic were hard times. What is more, many of the issues emerging in this period remained central to the intellectual debate of the early Imperial age. Sallust’s historiography, which is the subject of the papers by Sophia Papaioannou, Aaron Seider and Sarah Davies, provides valuable materials for the investigation of the conscious manipulation of memory and time patterns carried out by Latin writers in this delicate transition. In her close reading, Sophia Papaioannou interprets the *Catiline* and the *Jugurthine War* «as a single treatise consisting of two parts arranged in a reverse order», for even if the events narrated in the latter monograph chronologically precede those described in the former, the *Jugurtha*, which was composed later, gives rise to a complex network of allusions and cross-references. The observation that «the temporality of the *BI* is manipulated by the representation of the *BC*» opens the way to a wider reflection on the role of ideological models in the ancient historians’ construction (and de-construction) of time, as Sallust’s axioms on the sources and cyclical recurrence of evil tend to annihilate the boundaries between past and present. Papaioannou makes use of penetrating theoretical categories such as those developed by Reinhart Koselleck, Michel Foucault and Arthur Danto. In

16. In the words of the Epicurean Demetrius of Laconia, time is an «accident of accidents», as it depends on motion and rest which are accidental properties of bodies. Cf. SEDLEY 1999, 369-372.

addition, the chapter points to the long-standing influence of several Sallustian themes (mostly connected to the archetypal depiction of Catiline) on the works of Livy and Tacitus.

The great symbolic importance of the *Catiline* is also highlighted in Aaron Seider's discussion of the relationship between morality, memory, and historiographic writing. While remarking on the thought-provoking (and somewhat disorienting) character of Sallust's best-known monograph, Seider borrows fruitful hermeneutic tools from the field of cultural memory studies – a field relevant to several chapters in the collection, including those of Leonardis and Accardi.¹⁷ Notions like that of *social* and *entangled* memory allow Seider to explore the deep structure of Sallust's diagnosis of the first century BC crisis. Far from being a straightforward and resentful *laudator temporis acti*, Sallust, on this diagnosis, draws the reader's attention to «the essentially malleable nature of memory both in terms of its moral impact and its relationship to past events». And if the historian's agency is thus burdened with considerable responsibility, the milieu of society turns out to be «so fractured that not only are patterns of time now meaningless, but even basic ideas about moral progress and devolution divide Roman citizens».

Seider's chapter devotes special attention to the era of the civil wars as a crucial turning point, but it also provides useful insights into the long-term development of common memory strategies. A case in point is the progressive vilification of Romulus as a fratricide, a mythologeme first attested in Cicero's *De Officiis*, later revised by Horace and Livy, but intentionally rejected in Sallust's account.¹⁸ A further exploration of the cultural and commemorative background of Sallust's ethics of history, with particular regard to the influence of Polybius and the Graeco-Hellenistic tradition, is carried out by Sarah Davies. By focusing on 146 BC «as an unparalleled moment of beginning and ending, and as a combination of state and personal timeframes that mapped

17. For a stimulating presentation of this increasingly influential area of studies see ERLI and NÜNNING 2008. A special mention is due to the fundamental work of ASSMANN 2011, to which most contributors refer.

18. See BANNON 1997, 162-164. The paramount importance of similar re-uses of memory to the construction of Roman identity has been perceptively illustrated by GOWING 2005.

outwards, onto a universal and moralizing plane», Davies shows that several controversial features of the Sallustian *Weltanschauung* can be interpreted as a response to Polybius' and Posidonius' view of historical cycles of evil. We are reminded that from the second century BC onwards the ancient representation of the Mediterranean world, of its conflicts and changes, involves a complex discussion in which both Roman and Greek authors play an active role. The case of Sallust demonstrates that when different timescales are forced to converge under the pressure of political struggles, literary writing inevitably blurs the boundaries between standard conceptual oppositions.

The question of Posidonius' impact on the Roman conception of historical temporality surfaces also in the survey on Seneca's theory of progress conducted by one of the editors. After challenging the common positivist definition of progress and its *a posteriori* application to ancient texts, Fabio Tutrone discusses Seneca's most famous assertions about the development of human knowledge. While this and other aspects of Roman epistemology have an interesting afterlife in later Western thought, Seneca's own faith in the future possibilities of mankind is deeply embedded in the ancient cultural milieu. As several passages from the *Natural Questions* and the *Letters to Lucilius* reveal, writers like Seneca tend to conflate philosophical, scientific and social models into an organic system of representations that often diverges from modern paradigms. Indeed, like Varro, Cicero and Sallust, Seneca emphasizes the critical importance of individual and collective responsibilities, shying away from any ideological belief in the ineluctable «progress of history».

At various points in his paper, Tutrone discusses the position of other well-known authors of the Imperial age such as Manilius and Pliny the Elder, thus noting the competing intellectual viewpoints that characterize the Empire's first centuries. In the final chapter of the present volume, Joanna Komorowska takes a further step in this direction by examining the astrological work of the fourth-century AD writer Firmicus Maternus. Firmicus is usually remembered for his later conversion to Christianity, a conversion which led him to develop an intolerant attitude towards different beliefs. As author of the *Mathesis*, however, he engages in a technical astrological account of human progress which mirrors (and at the same reshapes) central beliefs of the Graeco-Roman *Kulturentstehungslehren*. In her sympathetic analysis,

Komorowska points out Firmicus' combination of linear and cyclical time patterns, as well as his attention to both heavenly and ethical phenomena. On the whole, it is clear that a fundamental shift has occurred in the Latin approach to the meaning of temporality, since not only does Firmicus repudiate Seneca's confidence in the continuing evolution of knowledge, but he also restricts dramatically the range of individual freedom. As in a bleak continuation of Sallust's vision, the value of man's participation in public life is abolished and the scope of personal originality is resolutely limited. To be sure, when natural time becomes a matter of deterministic laws and the only light comes from an ecstatic contemplation of the sky,¹⁹ the sense of human history radically changes. And the time of Rome gives way to a new era of sacralization.

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19. Cf. *Math.* 8.1.6, cited by Komorowska at the end her survey.

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