

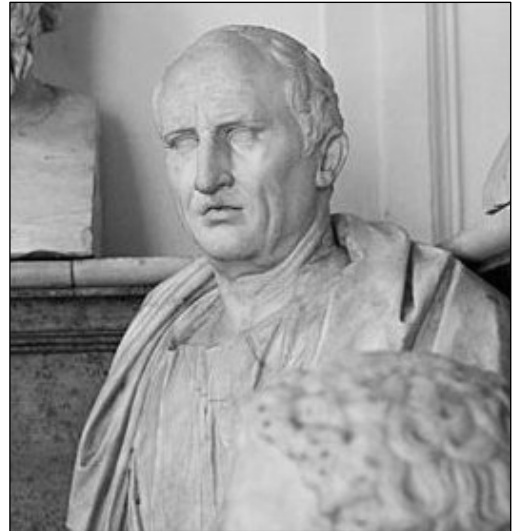
HIS MASTER'S VOICE: TIRO AND THE RISE OF THE ROMAN SECRETARIAL CLASS



While entertaining Pompey the Great at Cumae in April, 53 B.C., Marcus Tullius Cicero still found the time to write his beloved slave and secretary, Tiro, who was recovering at Formiae from a stomach flu. “My poor little studies (or if you like, *ours*) have simply pined away from longing for you,” Cicero reports.

But [your most recent letter] has made them lift up their eyes a little. Pompey is staying with me as I write these words; he is in good spirits and enjoying himself. When he expresses a desire to hear something of mine, I tell him that, without you, I am altogether dumb. Please be ready to render due services to our Muses. My promise [to release you] will be fulfilled on the appointed day [of your recovery and return]. (*Letters to His Friends* III, 339)

This document, an effective writ of manumission, reveals the great orator’s love for and complete reliance on his devoted scribe. The inventor of the first standardized and widespread system of Latin shorthand, the *notae Tironianae*, Tiro transcribed and edited Cicero’s speeches; composed, collected, and eventually published his voluminous correspondence; and organized and managed his accounts and archives. He was not only Cicero’s secretary and amanuensis, but his notary and C.P.A., researcher and librarian, editor and ghost writer, publicist and biographer. Without Tiro, Quintilian declares in his *Institutio Oratoria*, Cicero’s work and reputation would not exist, while Francesco Giulietti, an Italian classicist and historian of professional writing, calls Tiro Cicero’s “confidant and collaborator” (51, my translation).



But this affectionate and symbiotic relationship between orator and secretary also was symptomatic of a profound communications shift, one with ironic and disturbing implications for both classicists and scholars of professional and technical writing. Cicero and Tiro’s long and productive partnership, spanning some thirty-five years, corresponds to a time when professional and administrative writing played an increasingly dominant role in the Late Republic. From the time of the Catilinarian Conspiracy to the rise of the First and Second Triumvirates, Roman government, once primarily conducted through oratory, relied more and more on documentation to get its official business done and to justify its authority. When the Republic collapsed, the orator ceded true political power to the bureaucratic secretary, usually a freedman trained as a scribe or librarian.

Tiro’s system of shorthand contributed to this cultural and political transformation, and his career traces the impact of new writing technologies on morals and values. As his master’s fortunes sank with the dying Republic, Tiro’s began to rise. After Cicero’s assassination, he became partners with Atticus, the orator’s patron, friend, and publisher, serving as Cicero’s literary executor and biographer. Tiro’s talents were equally in demand by the Augustan bureaucratic regime, and he prospered by producing popular grammars and secretarial manuals. He died a wealthy centenarian and a full Roman citizen. To appreciate fully the representative quality of Tiro’s life and career, however, we must understand Roman functional writing and the impact of Tironian shorthand on Roman law, government, and documentation.

Marcus Tullius Tiro was born a slave in 94 B.C. on the Cicero family estate in Arpinum. For someone whose record-keeping would be so accurate and meticulous, his own early years have left almost no trace. Isidore of Seville, our primary source of Tironean lore,



concentrates on Tiro's shorthand methods, and the biographical information in Eusebius and Aulus Gellius is fragmentary and contradictory. For instance, was Tiro's father a Roman citizen, a Latin provincial, a Greek freedman or slave, or even Cicero's father? We may never know, but the last possibility could explain the great affection the boy inspired. His original name might have been Laurea, but when Cicero's father, a wealthy provincial knight, relocated to Rome in 96 B.C. to provide the best education for his two sons, Marcus and Quintus, young Cicero, eight years the boy's senior, made the toddler his pupil; hence the nickname Tiro, the Beginner.

Like all Roman children, Tiro was sent to elementary school, the *ludus litterarius*, to learn reading and writing. This was not an act of generosity but necessity. Rome was the most literate society of the classical world, "a civilization based on the book and the register," and "no one, either free or slave, could afford to be illiterate":

The written word was all around them, in both public and private life: laws, calendars, regulations at shrines, and funeral epitaphs were engraved in stone or bronze. The Republic amassed huge archives of reports on every aspect of public life. Praetors and magistrates kept records of every judgment that was handed down, . . . [which] formed the cornerstone of Roman jurisprudence. . . . At home, too, writing was important. Noble families . . . had their own [ancestral] archives. . . . But all families . . . kept books of farming tips, prayers, and remedies. Writing played a vital role in business too: contracts of sale, hire, association and estate management were all recorded on tablets and registers. Then there were the innumerable letters that Romans traveling far from home sent back to their friends in the City. (Dupont 223)

Only a born scribe, however, could have survived the tedium of Roman penmanship lessons. Jérôme Carcopino's account echoes the satires of Juvenal and Martial: "Without any preliminary training in holding or using a reed pen, [children] were suddenly faced with a pattern to copy. Their fingers had to be held by the master or guided by someone else to trace the outline of the letters placed before them" (106). As an apprentice secretary, Tiro would have been exposed to the three types of Roman handwriting: *capitalis monumentalis*, the majestic squared lettering reserved for monument inscriptions; *scripta actuarialis*, a "calligraphic" version of *monumentalis*, used for public notices, legal documents, and business contracts; and *capitalis rustica*, the workaday

scrawl of ordinary correspondence (Wallace 132). He also would have familiarized himself with the tools of his future trade: the iron stylus and wax diptych for rough drafts and ephemera, the goose quill and the different grades of papyri for permanent documents. In addition, the boy would have learned to make his own ink, "a mixture of soot, resin, wine dregs, and cuttlefish [or octopus] secretions" (Hadas 105).

By late adolescence, Tiro's character and talent had formed. A gracious youth with a quick hand and a cultivated mind, he was diligent and efficient but prone to nerves and upset stomach. "When he is in health," Cicero relates in an early letter to Atticus, "he is marvelously useful to me in every department of business and literature, . . . but his own charming character and modest bearing [are even more valuable]" (II, 35). The Cicero family must have wondered what to do with this prodigy. Should Tiro become a *libraro*, the household "copyist" and "librarian"; or a *scriba*, Marcus's or Quintus's "personal secretary" (Avrin 170)? These duties seemed too limited for his gifts; but in the future, provided he bought or won his freedom, he could be hired out as a *scriba questorius*, a government clerk, or an *apparitore*, a secretary in the Roman Senate. The latter position, "technically an annual appointment," was actually "for life" and paid handsomely (170). Naturally, Tiro would share the profits with his *patronus*.

As a slave, Tiro was forced to bide his time, but his horizons broadened between 79 and 77 B.C., when he accompanied Cicero on an educational tour of Greece and Asia Minor. This was a turning point in their young lives and the beginning of their collaboration. At Rhodes Cicero studied with the eminent rhetorician Apollonius Molon, who taught Marcus not only the fundamentals of oratory but the intricacies of Greek shorthand. "This gave Cicero the idea," speculates Francesco Giulietti, "of creating a similar shorthand system for Latin, which Tiro then worked out" (50, my translation).

Up to this point, no true Latin shorthand existed. According to legend, the third century B.C. epic poet Ennius had invented a system of eleven hundred characters to help in his recitations, but this had neither been preserved nor copied. That is because Roman patrician culture had ambivalent feelings about writing. As Rex Warner has shown, written Latin, derived from the Etruscan alphabet, first emerged among the Roman upper class around 600 B.C.—not for economic reasons, so that these wealthy aristocrats could keep accounts of their business transactions, but “as a symbol of prestige,” to engrave precious gifts such as cups and plates (123). Writing then evolved as a means to inscribe patrician pride in Roman history, to record the accomplishments of noble Romans. As central and ubiquitous as writing was in the Early and Middle Roman Republic, therefore, it was only a means to an end. It was functional, not ceremonial and hieratic as it was in Etruscan culture.



In Book II of Livy’s *History of Rome*, the young assassin Mucius Scaevola mistakenly stabs the secretary of the Etruscan king Porsena because the scribe “is dressed much like his master” and “most of the men addressed themselves to him” (118). Mucius goofs because he cannot believe magistrates and ministers would kowtow to a scribbler. As Republicans pledged to a city-state, the Romans were a people of civic space and embodied citizenship. Deeds and spoken words mattered. These had a voice. The written word was only a silent monument to deeds and words—important, to be sure, but still secondary. Literature, as we know it, barely existed. Romans, in fact, were so indifferent to books “that it was not until the first century B.C. that private libraries became coveted booty of war” (Cowell 166).

Not surprisingly, then, bureaucratic writing was kept to a minimum, even as Republic expansion produced more administrative work. True, senators and judges had secretaries in tow,

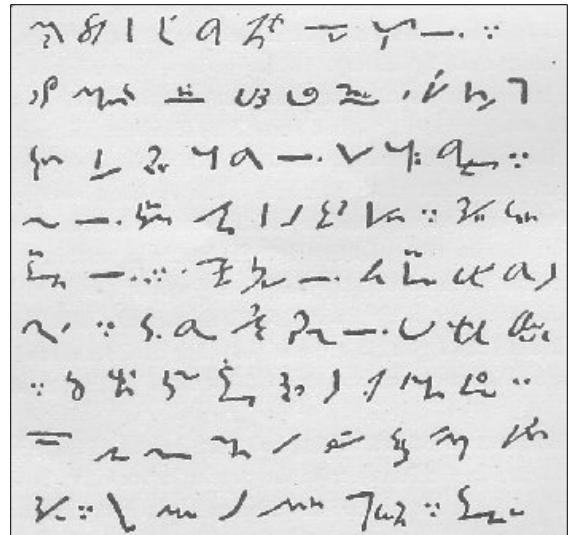
taking their dictation as they strode through the Forum or sat between sessions at the courts or the Curia, but this retinue was limited and produced little lasting documentation. "Republican magistrates," explains Karl Christ, "had at their disposal on a small number of subordinates to carry out orders (lictors, messengers, scribes, etc.) so that nothing in the way of bureaucracy developed, nor did the magistracy become dependent on its staff. Instead, the magistrates had to fall back on the help of their own families, their own *clientes*, or their friends" (27-8). Patricians considered it a point of honor not to burden the Republic with mundane words. Most daily writing, therefore—personal letters, dispatches to and from the frontier, outlines for speeches, rough drafts of proposals and laws—was composed on wax palimpsests and erased. Only landmark legislation and historic political and military accomplishments were preserved on papyrus or chiseled in bronze or marble. Documentation was reserved for Rome's finest moments, her acts and words of heroism. As such, the patricians entrusted it to those they considered incapable of heroism but conditioned for fidelity, slaves and freedmen. They were the humble recorders of Republican glory.

Since writing was a civic memory machine tended by servants, the Republican ruling class felt no need to calibrate it. For convenience, certain abbreviations were used in monuments, most famously "S.P.Q.R.," *Senatus Populusque Romanus*: the Senate and People of Rome. Other formulaic abbreviations evolved in private and public correspondence, such as "S.v.b.e.v.," *Si vales, bene est, valeo*: If you are well, all is right; I am well. These were hardly standardized. Necessity, however, prompted the Roman courts to create a more systematic form of abbreviation, the *notae juris*, which Cicero in his speech *Pro Murena* twits for being "a series of legal formulas" designed to make lawyers "indispensable in every case" (121). While some legal abbreviations were straightforward ("BFIO" for *benefico*, beneficiary; "TT" for *testamentum*, testament), others were deliberately equivocal. The resulting pettifogging could become quite funny, as this anecdote from Book II of Cicero's *De Oratore* shows:

In the prosecution of [Publius] Rufus Rutilius by [Aemilius] Scaurus on the charge of corrupt practices in the election to the consulship which Scaurus himself had won and Rutilius had lost, Scaurus called attention to the entry A.F.P.R. in Rutilius's election accounts, and said they stood for "Acting for Publius Rutilius," whereas Rutilius said they meant, "Allocated formerly, posted recently." Gaius Caninius [the presiding magistrate] called out that both these interpretations of the initials were wrong. . . . [They meant,] "Aemilius filched. Punish Rutilius!" (411, 413)

Despite these problems, further compounded by lack of punctuation and adequate spacing, no efforts were made to overhaul Latin professional writing. The *optimates*, Rome's senatorial and judiciary class, considered it beneath their dignity. Some of these patricians were stern Stoics, who had intellectual as well as class objections to tinkering with writing for the sake of mere utility. Two generations later, Seneca perfectly expresses their position in a letter to Lucilius: "Shorthand symbols by means of which even a rapidly delivered speech is taken down and the hand is able to keep up with the quickness of the tongue[,] . . . are inventions of the lowest slaves. Philosophy is far above this; she does not train men's hands; she is the instructress of men's minds" (170-71). Nevertheless, when Seneca became Nero's prime minister, he "codified, revised, and expanded" Tiro's shorthand system to improve the Imperial Civil Service (Giulietti 77, my translation).

How did Cicero's secretary create and perfect this new form of writing? His manual and original code have been lost, but biographical sources and medieval copies of Tironean tables provide some clues. According to Isidore of Seville, Tiro sped up transcription by abbreviating prepositions. As his writing accelerated, Francesco Giulietti believes, Tiro "compressed and simplified" Roman copyhand, *capitolonis rustica*, into an "abstract" symbol system



(59, my translation). To better capture syllables and inflection, however, Tiro supplemented these

Latin scrawls with Greek shorthand to "truncate and contract" words (60, my translation). Then came the breakthrough: Tiro then combined these mixed signs like notes in a score to record not just phrases, but, as Cicero marvels in a letter to Atticus, "whole sentences" (III, 161). Through repetition and fine-tuning, Tiro simplified and standardized these symbol clusters, further streamlining his writing. The result was a semiotic tool and die press, "the most artistic and varied," not to mention accurate, shorthand system in antiquity (Giulietti 60, my translation).

We cannot underestimate the impact of Tironean shorthand on Cicero's life and work. On a private level, Tiro's system encouraged Cicero's passion for letter writing, much to the benefit of posterity. Over nine hundred of Cicero's letters have survived, most dictated to Tiro but some written by Cicero using Tiro's system. "What I said about the ten legates," he writes to Atticus, "you did not fully understand, I suppose, because I wrote it in shorthand" (III, 175). But Tiro would teach his method to Cicero's friends, family, and clients. Atticus's secretary, Alexis, was so well trained that Cicero called him "a second Tiro" (23). Cicero's son, Marcus Junior, typically was less disciplined. Writing from school in Athens, he tells Tiro: "Do please get a clerk sent out to me, preferably a Greek. I waste a lot of time copying out my [shorthand] notes [from lectures]" (Cicero, *Letters to His Friends* III, 369). From Cicero's circle, Tiro's system apparently spread among Rome's close-knit political community. According to Suetonius, even Julius Caesar, Cicero's great rival, used Tironean shorthand as a "confidential cipher"—a practice that would have dire repercussions for both Cicero and the Republic (39).

The real boon of Tiro's stenography, however, was to Cicero's public life. As a jurist and an administrator, Cicero needed to write in code. When serving as *quaestor* in Sicily (75 to 74 B.C.), he probably used shorthand to gather evidence against the corrupt governor, Verres, whom he would prosecute five years later in Rome. As governor of Cilicia, Cicero composed reports to the Senate in shorthand, for the sake of speed and secrecy. "You see," he confides to tribune Gaius Trebonius, "I have one way of writing what I think will be read by those to whom I address my

letter, and another way of writing what I think will be read by many" (*Letters to His Friends*, III 315). But it was as an orator, ironically, that Cicero most needed and profited from Tiro's services.

Cicero became Rome's greatest speaker, paradoxically enough, because he appreciated and exploited the technology of writing. "The pen is the best and most eminent author of eloquence," he declares in Book I of *De Oratore*. "For if an extempore and casual speech is easily beaten by one prepared and thought-out, the latter will assuredly be surpassed by what has been written with care and diligence" (103). Furthermore, "the actual marshalling and arrangement of words is made perfect in the course of writing, in a rhythm and measure proper to oratory as distinct from poetry" (105).



Speaking like a hydraulics engineer, Cicero compares the pen to an aqueduct or conduit: it allows thoughts to "flow" and channels the best ideas to "the point of [one's] pen" (105). This technical metaphor never would have occurred to a patrician orator, who would have considered it undignified, but Cicero was a *homo novus*, a New Man, a middle-class provincial elbowing his way into Rome's exclusive senatorial class. At the start of his career, he lacked the *dignitas*, the personal dignity and social clout, necessary to give his words unquestioned authority. Writing was Cicero's way of legitimizing his speaking; and Tiro, in a sense, became his master's voice.

Cicero's surviving speeches were never delivered as written and are clearly the product of collaboration. But what specific role did Tiro play in them? Classicist Michael Grant provides some answers by performing an archeology of Cicero's texts. The original speeches, he maintains, worked from an outline. "Cicero's method," Grant states, "was to learn an elaborate introduction and peroration by heart, but to rely on rough notes or a skeleton for what came between" (30).

These notes, almost certainly in shorthand and prepared by Tiro, aided Cicero's memory and shaped his eloquence, as he admits in *De Oratore*:

If ever, during a speech, [an orator] has introduced a written note, the rest of his discourse, when he turns away from the writing, will proceed in an unchanging style. Just as when a boat is moving at high speed, if the crew rests upon the oars, the craft herself still keeps her way and her run, though the driving force of the oars has ceased, so in an unbroken discourse, when written notes are exhausted, the rest of the speech still maintains a like progress, under the impulse given by the similarity and energy of the written word. (105)

Structurally, the bodies of Cicero's speeches needed to be open and loose, to allow for questions, interruptions, digressions, and grandstanding. But Tiro and other shorthand secretaries were in the audience recording everything. Plutarch confirms this fact in his "Life of Cato the Younger," and copies of Tironean tables are littered with recognizable phrases from Cicero's speeches, such as the thundering opening to the *First Catalinam*: *Quosque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?* How much longer, Cataline, will you abuse our patience? Tiro's meticulous accuracy explains the conversational nature of Cicero's speeches, their dramatic, sometimes dialogical quality. Tiro, in effect, was taking minutes as well as dictation, incorporating "the cross-examinations and slanging matches" of court and senate into Cicero's arguments (Grant 30).

Cicero reworked Tiro's transcripts into the written drafts of his speeches, which Tiro then polished, edited, and duplicated. He probably supervised their mass production at Atticus's copying house and their distribution all over the Capitol. Many Late Republican orators preserved and published their speeches, but none were as aggressively and thoroughly self-promotional as Cicero, who converted his speeches into propagandistic pamphlets and tracts to justify his authority and to build his reputation. His writing reinforced his oratory and sometimes substituted for it. Only the first of the five *Verrines* was delivered in 70 B.C. Verres exiled himself to Marseilles to avoid conviction. Cicero, however, wrote and published the remaining four speeches, effectively trying Verres *in absentia*. Half the *Catilinae* and most of the *Philippics against Mark Antony* also were

written and not delivered. The Republic was disintegrating, and the spoken word was being replaced by the letter.

Sadly, Cicero himself helped paved the way for this transition. He suppressed the Catalinarian Conspiracy of 63 B.C. partly by institutionalizing shorthand in the Senate. To save the state from insurrection, Cicero, serving as consul, advocated gagging Cataline accomplices and executing them without trial. Historians still debate whether or not this severity was justified, but Cicero's proposal was clearly unconstitutional and divided the Senate. To maintain accuracy and impartiality, and, no doubt, to protect himself, Cicero ordered every syllable of the proceedings to be recorded. According to Plutarch, this was the first official use of Tironean shorthand in state affairs: "Cicero chose clerks who excelled in rapid writing instruction in the use of signs, which, in small and short figures, comprised the force of many letters; these clerks he had then distributed in various parts of the Senate House. For up to that time the Romans did not employ or even possess what are called shorthand writers, but then for the first time, we are told, the first steps toward the practice were taken" (291).

To legitimize this practice, Cicero asked four prominent senators to take shorthand during the interrogation of Cicero's informers. He identifies these men in *Pro Sulla*, a speech made a year after the treason trials: Gaius Cosconius, then praetor; Marcus Messalla, a candidate for the praetorship; Publius Nigidius; and Appius Claudius. "And what men!" Cicero gushes; "men not only of undoubted probity and honor . . . but those who could, as I knew, most easily take down what was being said because of their memory, their knowledge, and their facility in writing. . . . I suppose there is no one who thinks these men either lacked honesty or the ability to make a true record" (301).

After the Senate passed the death sentences by a narrow margin, Cicero justified this controversial decision by circulating the transcripts of the deliberations. He presents this fact as the epitome of high-mindedness, but it seems more like evidence of high-handedness:

When I knew the evidence had been entered in the public records, but that those records would be kept after our ancestral custom in the custody of private persons, I did not keep the evidence secret nor confine it in my house, but at once I gave orders that it should be transcribed by all the public clerks, distributed everywhere, given the fullest publicity and made known in detail to the Roman people. I sent it broadcast through all Italy. I sent it to all the provinces; I wished no one to be ignorant of that testimony by which safety had been brought to all. And so I say there is no place in all the world where the name of the Roman people is known to which this transcribed evidence has not come. (301, 303)

Cicero's private cipher had become the bureaucratic code of the state, and Republican oratory had degenerated into the sensationalism of the *Starr Report*.



Cicero's questionable handling of the Catalinarian Conspiracy led to

his banishment in 58 B.C., just after Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus had formed the First Triumvirate. Although he was recalled within a year, somewhat repaired his damaged reputation, and served adequately, if not distinguishably as governor of Cilicia, the outbreak of civil war between Caesar and Pompey, culminating in Caesar's dictatorship in 48 B.C., wrecked free speech and forced Cicero into semi-retirement. Three years later, these political losses were compounded by a devastating personal loss, the death of Cicero's daughter, Tullia. Shattered, Cicero withdrew completely from public life and sought consolation in literature and scholarship. Under these circumstances, Tiro became more indispensable to him than ever:

He knew how to do everything, manage the estates, recover debts, draw up guest lists. He acted as librarian and record-keeper and above all knew how to listen to Cicero, put up with his unbelievable conceit, and provide him with cues during literary and political conversations. Cicero could no longer manage without him. . . . When, following Caesar's rise to power, Cicero's career declined, Tiro was on hand to console him and to assure him that he was still the greatest politician in Rome and the saviour of the fatherland. (Dupont 67-68)

Writing was now Cicero's only means of expression, and Tiro encouraged and helped him to produce his great political and philosophical works: *Tusculan Disputations*, *On Old Age*, *On Friendship*, and *On Duties*. Cicero's method of composition probably involved intensive dictation sessions, staggered and interspersed with more relaxed periods of revision and relieved by stretches of recreation. As Pliny the Younger describes in Book IX of his *Letters*, this marathon began at dawn and lasted all day, with the secretary acting as marker and track coach:

I wake usually about sunrise. My shutters stay closed, for in the stillness and the darkness [I can better] visualize my thoughts. If I have anything on hand, I work it out in my head, choosing and correcting the wording, and the amount I achieve depends on the ease or difficulty with which my thoughts can be marshalled and kept in my head. Then I call my secretary, the shutters are opened, and I dictate what I put into shape; he goes out, is recalled, and again dismissed. Three or four hours after[,] . . . I betake myself according to the weather either to the terrace or the covered arcade, work out the rest of the subject, and dictate it. I go for a drive, and spend time in the same way whether walking or lying down; my powers of concentration do not flag and are in fact refreshed by the change. (256)

Appropriately, most of Cicero's treatises are in dialogue form, reflecting the give-and-take between orator and secretary. Like all special servants in Roman households, Tiro was his master's "shadow" and "double" (Dupont 58). He shared Cicero's passion for philosophy and literature, and, as was customary with freedmen, bore Cicero's name. For his part, Cicero treated Tiro practically like an equal, addressing him in letters without his *praenomen*, a sign of intimacy and affection usually reserved for family members. More to the point, he valued Tiro's opinion when it came to writing. The two spent hours together in Cicero's study and library in Tusculum, each working on his own composition before handing it to the other for feedback. We know this from one of Cicero's letters to Tiro, written from Rome in late December 45 B.C.: "Are you composing something in the style of Sophocles?" he asks eagerly. "Let us see what you have done" (III, 359).

This literary idyll abruptly ended in 44 B.C., with Julius Caesar's assassination. Cicero rushed back to Rome to take his place in the Senate, only to discover that Mark Antony had assumed the dictatorship—and had used Tironean shorthand to justify his usurpation! After Caesar's

murder, Antony had found his notebooks, written in shorthand and full of unfinished memoranda and rough proposals concerning legislation. These documents, Antony argued, gave him the right and authority to continue Caesar's policies. The Senate need only approve them. Cicero was outraged. Roman law and authority, he countered, is defined and sanctioned through Senatorial debate. “Are the acts we are being asked to ratify,” he asks in the *First Philippic*, “the ones that are jotted down in scrappy memoranda and handwritten scrawls and notebooks produced on the sole authority of Antonius . . . whereas the acts that Caesar himself engraved on brass tablets, with the intention of preserving the national Assembly’s directions and definitive law, are to be totally disregarded?” (305).

Cicero is not simply defending constitutional protocol; he is pleading for the primacy of orality in Roman governance, for accountability in face-to-face debate and for the freedom that allowed a Tribune of the People to defeat an unjust motion merely by saying, “*Veto!*” I forbid. Only after open discussion, he reminds his audience, can the Senate “give orders to have [the] bronze tablets [of Roman law] be engraved with the legal formula, ‘The consuls by right of law put the question to the people, . . . and the people by right of law passed the measure’” (311). Without free speech, written law cannot be just or sane. Converting Caesar’s posthumous shorthand into living decrees would be lunacy! To illustrate, Cicero indulges in characteristic sarcasm: “Exiles are recalled from banishment—by a man who is dead. A dead man, again, has conferred citizenship, not merely on individuals but on entire nations and provinces. A dead man has wiped out national revenues, by unlimited grants of exemption” (310).

But it was the Republic, not Caesar that was dead. Cicero’s brilliance as a speaker made him underestimate the material conditions of his time and the power of new media. Oratory can be



effective in a city-state but not in a half-formed empire. Even the most stentorian orator, after all, cannot be heard in far-flung Boethia. Administering Rome's conquered provinces required writing, and the legionnaires who now held the Senate hostage—who had built roads throughout Italy and to the frontiers, who had made it possible for a dispatch from Britain to reach Rome in two weeks and had paved the way for the proliferation of letter-writing in the first century B.C.—were vanguards of a new communications paradigm as well as a new autocracy. Cicero partly understood the emerging role of Latin writing, as seen in his handling of the Catalinarian Conspiracy and in the composition and distribution of his speeches, but he belonged and was loyal to a doomed oral culture. When the Second Triumvirate formed, he was marked for execution. His severed head and hands were displayed on the rostrum of the Forum. Fulvia, Mark Antony's wife, spitefully thrust a hair-pin through Cicero's tongue, while Antony kept as a souvenir the right hand that had penned the *Philippics*.

Tiro, in contrast, outlived his master by sixty years. With his *peculium*, his freedman's nest egg, he purchased a farm near Puteoli and, with Atticus's help, edited and published Cicero's speeches and letters. These books were commercially successful, and Augustus, the new emperor, found them politically useful. Cicero's collected speeches provided Augustus with the necessary Republican trappings to validate his new regime, while Cicero's letters gave Augustus the ammunition to discredit a powerful predecessor. Cicero carefully had chosen seventy letters for posterity, those showing him in the best possible light, but Augustus encouraged Tiro to release them all, exposing to the world Cicero's vanity, timidity, and hypocrisy. Following Augustus's lead, Tiro then published *De jociis Ciceronis*, a three-volume collection of Cicero's jokes, and a four-volume biography of Cicero. Both works, now lost, became sources for Plutarch's "Life of Cicero." Tiro's biography was hardly flattering, though. He revealed, for instance, how Cicero divorced his wife Terentia to pay off his debts. "Tiro the complimentary mirror of his patron," notes Florence Dupont, "was no longer bound to submission and so became Tiro the sharp observer" (68).

Through Augustus's patronage, Tiro prospered. The young emperor must have had a soft spot for the old freedman, since as a boy he had learned Tironian shorthand from his great-uncle, Julius Caesar. Tiro probably had a hand in preserving some of Augustus's letters and almost certainly trained the new imperial clerks. His modest wealth and reputation allowed him to become an author in his own right. He never did finish his Sophoclean tragedy, but according to Aulus Gellius, he produced a textbook on Latin grammar, *De usu atque ratione linguae latinae*, and an encyclopedic secretarial manual, *Pandectae*, which expounded his shorthand system. These works have disappeared, but Eusebius of Caesarea records Tiro's death in his *Chronicon*, a two-volume history of the world from Abraham to Constantine: "Marcus Tullius Tiro, Cicero's freedman and the first inventor of shorthand, died on his farm near Puteoli at the ripe old age of one hundred, in the year 2013 of Abraham [4 A.D.]" (quoted in Giulietti 51, my translation). He was considered important enough to have a small monument erected in his memory, but that too has vanished.

When Tiro died, the Empire was firmly established, and the freedman secretary had begun to replace the citizen orator as a figure of cultural significance. In fact, Tironian scribes and Tironian script appear frequently in Augustan literature. Horace, who worked as a *scriba quaestorius* in the Treasury, mentions Tironian shorthand as a commentary on Augustan society. Instead of copying notes at the Senate, Catius in *Satire II.4* has been taking shorthand at a cooking lecture. *Ode IV.8* is more serious: Roman heroism could not exist, Horace declares, unless the secretary, like the poet, existed to record it. Indeed, Manilius in Book IV of *Astronomica* thanks the constellation Libra for providing Rome with good stenographers: "His letter represents a word," sings the poet, "and by means of his symbols he can keep ahead of utterance and record in novel notation the long



speech of a rapid speaker" (237). Ovid is more down-to-earth: Byblis in Book IX of the *Metamorphoses* uses shorthand to write a love letter.

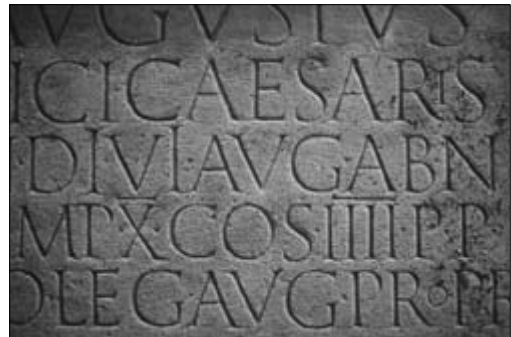
By the reign of Augustus's grand-nephew, Claudius, however, Tironean shorthand was seen more negatively. Claudius—a pedantic antiquarian dominated by his freedman secretary, Narcissus—dramatically expanded the Rome's Civil Service. He divided the Imperial Chancery into Greek and Latin departments and developed a number of specialized sections: "the letter office for foreign, legal, and administrative affairs; the petition office, for petitions and investigations; the memorandum office, for short decrees; and an office for general internal administration" (Jackson 41, 43). This new system proved highly efficient, but Claudius had a mania for ciphers and codes. He wrote his histories and autobiography in secret shorthand and added three phonetic letters to the Latin alphabet. According to Pliny the Elder, he also improved paper manufacture. The emperor's detractors claimed he was so bookish that he drank ink and relied on shorthand because his limp and stutter made him such a poor speaker. Seneca exploits these aspersions in *The Apocolocyntosis*, his satire on Claudius's posthumous deification. As Janus in the Senate of the gods moves to bar the stammering emperor from heaven, the stenographer has trouble keeping up with his speech. Finally, the Olympians condemn Claudius to hell, where he will serve as Caligula's legal secretary.

If Roman emperors behaved like secretaries, Roman secretaries often behaved like emperors. Silver Age satirists often ridiculed the self-importance of these Tironean scribes. Rufum, the secretary in Martial's *Epigram V.51*, is more pompous than a Republican senator: "This fellow whose left hand is loaded with documents, who is surrounded by a smooth-faced band of stenographers, who lends a grave face to the notebooks and letters proffered on all sides, like to Cato or Tully or Brutus—though [the garrote] constrain him, he can't say 'have' in Latin or 'chaire' on Greek" (I, 401). Consistently, secretaries are depicted as suffering from speech impediments and are accused of strangling free speech. Tacitus in the *Dialogue on Orators* blames not only tyranny but bureaucracy for the death of Republican eloquence. He spoke from bitter experience. Under the

bloody Domitian, the Senate became a charterhouse as well as a charnel house. Between executions, there was almost no debate. Instead, senators mostly took down the Emperor's dictation and drafted his edicts. Functional writing had reduced them to mere functionaries.

Tiro's shorthand system had launched a terrible Saturnalia, a topsy-turvy winter carnival in which master and slave had exchanged places. From the perspective of dialectical materialism, this reversal was inevitable and necessary. The Late Republic, after all, was hardly an open or a just society, and its own cruelties and contradictions led to its undoing. Bertold Brecht might have dramatized the relationship between Cicero and Tiro with sardonic gusto. But the history of Tironean shorthand contains implications that are too disturbing to be funny.

Scholars and historians of professional and technical writing often claim that technological revolutions in communications empower the marginalized and encourage freedom, but the story of Tironean shorthand shows that not all communications



revolutions are benign and that empowering the disenfranchised does not necessarily encourage good citizenship or secure liberty. As our own Republic experiments with electronic democracy, creating new codes, new media, and new writing technologies for the Forum of the twenty-first century, we should be wary. The Information Highway may not be the Apian Way to freedom. Professional and institutional languages have become increasingly technical and abstract, while computers, E-mail, and faxes have dematerialized public space and public discourse. Instead of being the rhetors of a virtual republic, we could become the scribes of a new empire.

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