A STUDY IN INCOHERENCE: THE FIRST BOOK OF TACITUS' *HISTORIES*

B. WALKER

HUMAN nature, in Tacitus, is more often evil than good; and the downward tendency, or the disintegrative tendency, is always powerful in men and in society. History is seen as a process of decay. War and tyranny, civil strife and corruption, arise as a spontaneous outcome of human greed and the lust for power, "vetus ac iam pridem insita mortalibus potentiae cupido" (*Hist.* 2. 38). The theme is traditional in both historians and poets, and Tacitus is expressing in more extreme terms a concept long familiar to the Romans. This "dark decline" is discussed by Russell T. Scott, in an impressive book which treats its complex subject with remarkable clarity;[1] Scott shows how like and finally how unlike Tacitus was to other, frailer, Roman pessimists such as Lucan or Marcus Aurelius. Scott points out how the movement *in deterius* is often marked by divine signs, but never checked by divine intervention. Indeed the gods, if they care at all, are moved by wrath and vindictiveness toward men and especially toward the Romans: "deum ira in rem Romanam" (*Ann.* 4. 1), "ira illa numinum in res Romanas" (*Ann.* 16. 16). Tacitus' most complete survey of the world at any moment in his history—the *Histories* prologue—includes as a considered judgment "non esse curae deis securitatem nostram, esse ultionem" (*Hist.* 1. 3).

In this world of terror and moral chaos, any act of courage or fidelity becomes gratuitous heroism which the historian feels bound to record and to honor. "Non . . . adeo virtutum sterile saeculum ut non et bona exempla prodiderit" (*Hist.* 1. 3). Tacitus is thinking of men like L. Piso's slave (*Hist.* 4. 50), who died for the "gallant lie" by which he tried to save his master. Actions like this are seen as the one positive value that remains, against the background of human incoherence and divine malignity. Tacitus speaks of such deeds as *exempla* which must be rescued from oblivion. To recognize the true virtues and vices of men, under whatever disguise, and impartially to mete out praise or condemnation, is for him perhaps the greatest responsibility of a historian, and part of what Scott calls his "tenacious *fides* toward his heritage and its continuing development in history."[2] Yet the heroic act of self-sacrifice or loyalty, like the Stoic gesture of intransigence *in nullum reipublicae usum*, can make no difference to the downward course of events.

Tacitus then offers a bleak and terrifying view of human existence, which compels assent while one reads the austerely pessimistic *Agricola* or the lurid and gloomy *Annals*. The *Histories*, however, can miss. This is not only

1. *Religion and Philosophy in the "Histories" of Tacitus* (American Academy in Rome, 1968), pp. 48–52.
2. Ibid., p. 127.

because the narrative is more intricate. The expression of Tacitus' view of life is more impersonal, more subtle, and finally—but not instantly—more cogent, than in any other work of Tacitus.

The prologue to the *Agricola* has the intensity of personal experience, which compels attention for a work of *pietas*. The *Annals* is introduced by a personal claim again, this time an almost defiant assertion that the writer is in control: "sine ira et studio, quorum causas procul habeo." In the *Histories*, in spite of *mihi* (twice in chap. 1) and *dignitatem nostram*, the tone of the prologue makes the first person much less obtrusive.[3] Tacitus goes on to state the historian's duty in terms of impersonal principle, very different from the active verb *procul habeo* of *Annals* 1. 1: "incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est."

This difference in manner between the two prologues is characteristic of the two works as a whole. Compared with the masterly design and detail of the *Histories*, the *Annals* appears flawed by personal insecurity, and the style of the *Annals* runs to exaggeration and almost caricature when compared with the reality and effectiveness of the language in the *Histories*. Perhaps for this very reason, the *Annals* is often more arresting and seems more approachable than the earlier work, which was more authoritative and artistically more complete.

R. H. Martin[4] emphasizes the power and originality of Tacitus' writing in the *Histories*. Even when the material is evidently largely borrowed, it is transmuted, not merely rearranged, into Tacitean language and thought, and made an organic part of the structure. The most enlightening critique of the *Histories* as a work of literature remains the book by E. Courbaud, *Les Procédés d'art de Tacite dans les "Histoires,"* published in Paris in 1918.

Much of Courbaud's study is concerned with dramatic elements in the *Histories*, and it may be that these are likely to make more impact at a first reading of Book 1 than anything else. Otho in chapter 21, for instance, is a tragic character expressing his divided emotions in monologue:[5] *fingebat* (sc. *sibi*, Courbaud adds) introduces his soliloquy. *Occidi Othonem posse* Courbaud paraphrases with relish: "Oui, le bel Othon n'est pas à l'abri du poignard"; he points out how, in Euripides and Seneca, a tragic hero will refer to himself in this way by name in the course of a tense soliloquy. (This passage, together with the speeches of Otho and Piso, balanced point for point like a *controversia*, was used by Corneille in his *Othon*.) The characters are grouped almost visually, like the characters on a stage (and we need not go into the insoluble question whether Tacitus ever actually saw dramatic characters grouped on a stage or not; he would certainly have read tragedies, both Greek and Latin). If one reads aloud, in translation, for example chapters 27, 35, or 41, the visual drama is obvious.[6]

3. A. L. Irvine, ed., *Tacitus: "Histories" Books I & II* (London, 1952), ad loc., rightly describes *non abnuerim* in chapter 1 as a "cautious, polite, or modest assertion"—an acknowledgment of one's moral responsibility.

4. "Tacitus and his Predecessors" in T. A. Dorey, ed., *Tacitus* (London, 1969), pp. 117 ff. The collection of essays in this volume is very uneven.

5. Courbaud, *Procédés*, pp. 220–21.

6. On the subject of translations, does anyone still use Church and Brodribb (1873), or the still

But the moment which one remembers is the death of Galba; and if anyone is cast as a tragic hero it seems Galba must be the man. The dramatic climax of chapters 40–43 has been fully prepared and it does not fail to move pity and fear. It is worth asking why the reader feels these "tragic emotions." Galba falls from greatness, in that he had been *imperator Romanus*, embodiment of power and authority, and is now *inermis et senex*, anonymous, hacked to pieces by assassins who cannot be identified. After the warnings given by Piso in chapter 30, the reader must expect worldwide disaster and chaos to follow. The emperor's murder begins a chain of violence which will lead to the burning of the Capitol in 3. 72—"facinus post conditam urbem luctuosissimum foedissimumque."

Tacitus is appalled by this outrage, which defiles Rome's national and religious traditions; and the death of Galba too is a defilement. In a most acute passage,[7] Scott points out how powerful a symbol is made, both here and later in Books 2 and 3, of the *lacus Curtii* where Galba died. This murder is promptly followed by the assassination of Piso, where for one moment there is a "brief flicker of *Romanitas*"[8] in Sempronius Densus' heroic action in Piso's defense. Galba's own conduct at the crisis was variously described, but Tacitus allows the last word to rest with those who reported some dignity and patriotism in his end. There is an evocation of tragedy, too, with "militem impresso gladio iugulum eius hausisse" (*Hist.* 1. 41; cf. Sen. *HF* 1312, *Thy.* 1057, *Oed.* 1036; and also *iugulus Caesaris haustus* in Lucan 10. 387).

Emotions of pity and fear, then, are stirred by the associations of Galba's death and by the sense of national doom which Tacitus attaches to it. Galba is placed in the position of a tragic hero, and at the last moment rises to something like a fitting response. But he has never been a tragic hero in any personal sense. Until this point, he has been totally inept in any tragic, or indeed any positive, role. His qualities are usually reported at second hand and they remain nebulously uncertain: *mobilitas ingenii* (7), *vox anceps* (5), *auctoritas fluxa* (21), *inertia* (6). Phrases like these all lead up to the celebrated obituary of negatives in chapter 49. Galba's own speeches and behavior suggest a man struggling vainly beneath intolerable pressures (the hectic opening sentence of 14, for instance); a man who would like to assume an authoritative imperial role, guided by old-fashioned principles (*antiquus rigor*) and not by merely selfish motives. Tacitus is not trying to make Galba appear simply contemptible (he omits the derisive phrase reported in Suet. *Galba* 14, which termed Vinius, Laco, and Icelus the emperor's *paedagogi*). But Tacitus does show Galba as a man unable to take any initiative, a man whose attempts to do so (32–33, 35) misfire ludicrously.

In his discussion of this passage, Alain Michel[9] emphasizes the element

older Arthur Murphy (1793), available in the Everyman edition? It would be regrettable if Kenneth Wellesley's highly skillful modern version (Baltimore, 1964) swept these away for all occasions; both earlier translations have great virtues.

7. Scott, *Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 61–62.

8. Ibid., p. 58.

9. *Tacite et le destin de l'Empire* (Paris, 1966), pp. 199–200. Michel's book is useful, even if one would quarrel with so plainly Stoic an interpretation of Tacitus' thinking.

of irony in these chapters—an irony which is not only dramatic but conveys a serious historical judgment. What brings about Galba's death? It is his own ineptitude in thinking he could actually adopt and transfer power to a senator of high moral character. Why was the popular support which made him emperor unable to maintain him? It was based on illusion, a *consensus errantium* (35).

Piso's *mos antiquus* is no more effective than Galba's *rigor;* he too is incapable of action. The army, senate, and people are all gripped by a kind of palsy, which makes them wait passively for some force to sweep them along. In chapter 6 Tacitus speaks of the troops in a rather startling phrase: "ingens novis rebus *materia*, ut non in unum aliquem, prono favore, ita audenti parata." The use of the abstract *materia* to refer to a group of people is especially characteristic of this book,[10] and so is the idea of a vague expectancy and the theoretical impulse which is not attached to any reality.[11] There is a similar account of the legions in Gaul at the time of Vitellius' attack: "plurima ad fingendum credendumque *materies* in ipsis castris" (*Hist.* 1. 51).

The frequency of abstract nouns is one of the features of the style of Book 1 of the *Histories* which make translation a more than usually difficult exercise. Chapter 12 (in no way untypical) has sixteen abstract nouns, of which six are grammatical subjects; and there are three passive verbs, including the impersonal *peccaretur*, so that personal subjects are almost entirely avoided. Generalizing words such as *multi*, *talia*, *hunc vel illum*, contribute to this impression of chaotic and dehumanized events, together with the violent, or at least physical, metaphors (*rupta reverentia*, *mollius*, *facilitas*, *hiantes*, *fessa aetate*). The aphoristic style of the last sentence, with its Senecan moral paradox, makes a characteristic ending to the chapter. (This chapter is not a showpiece; the style of the *Histories* is very evenly controlled, though it is related to context, to a degree which few editors point out.)

All kinds of groups and individuals, then, throughout the *Histories*, are indecisive and querulously inactive. They do not know what is happening and are prey to lies and self-deception ("neque illis iudicium aut veritas," 32), and cowardice saps any power of resolution they might have. Indeed the only characters in the book who are specifically said to achieve any of their purposes are the two unscrupulous *manipulares* of chapter 25, who took a bribe from Otho and undertook "imperium populi Romani transferendum—*et transtulerunt.*"

So if the book has the quality of a drama, it is certainly not a drama of the Aristotelian kind, with a hero whose actions can be seen to proceed by the logic of character; in the *Histories* men appear to have no choices and no responsibility for events, and so action is deprived of a stable moral content.

10. As my husband Denis Henry points out to me.

11. Heinz Heubner's erudite commentary (Heidelberg, 1963), ad loc., makes no comment on *materia*, but Heubner does point out the Virgilian character of *audens* as an adjective, quoting the heroic *contra audentior ito* of *Aen.* 6. 95; the word occurs also in *Hist.* 1. 3, *propinqui audentes*.

Vitellius' troops, for example, "ipsa vitia pro virtutibus interpretabantur" (52): this is a typical reversal of moral values, which could be paralleled in Sallust, and many times in the plays of Seneca. It is, in fact, in the tragedies of Seneca that we can find the equivalent and *possibly* the origin of the kind of dramatic atmosphere and dramatic irony which Tacitus uses so powerfully throughout this book. Closest, perhaps, to the *Histories'* theme of human helplessness is the *Hercules furens:* "at gens hominum fertur rapidis / obvia fatis incerta sui" (183–84). But the idea of "moral reversal" is everywhere in the plays.

After the death of Galba there is another moment of nervous expectancy when some undefined doom seems likely to fall; and before the second half of the book, the advance of Vitellius, begins, Tacitus inserts a chapter (50) which rounds off—with verbal echoes of chapter 2—the theme of "global disaster" introduced in the prologue. P. Wuillieumier describes this chapter[12] as "une habile transition entre les deux premiers actes de la guerre civile" (comparing it also to the opening of Book 2 of Lucan's *Pharsalia*). It is "une méditation tragique," and the dimension of tragedy enters with the suggestion that Otho and Vitellius, "omnium mortalium impudicitia, ignavia, luxuria deterrimi," were chosen "velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter"—"apparently appointed by fate for the very purpose of destroying the empire." The only certainty was disaster: "solum id scires, deteriorem fore qui vicisset." "The more evil of the two would be the winner," Donald Dudley translates.[13] But Tacitus means more than this, as the pluperfect verb indicates. Once he had won, either A or B would become worse than the loser; never *capax imperii*, how much less so *si imperasset*.[14]

We are to take this theme seriously. Otho and Vitellius are equally ineffectual in the vortex[15] of their mutinous armies, and the second "act" of the drama presents a fluctuating situation where the theme of pretense (especially in connection with Otho) is added to that of moral decline: "falsae virtutes et vitia reditura" (71). In this second half of the book, Vespasian is hardly mentioned, so that his appearance at the opening of Book 2 becomes all the more impressive. He had been marked out in chapter 50, and previously in chapter 10; and what most clearly indicates supernatural guidance is precisely his exemption from the deterioration which awaited all other possible emperors. This had been proved in experience: Tacitus uses an indicative verb: "solus omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est" (50).

Is the Flavian dynasty to be regarded then as a heaven-sent deliverance for Rome, or as a lucky interval in the inevitable process of corruption? Tacitus does not answer this question. Vespasian's moral improvement does not follow the general pattern, and this scrupulous statement that it did

12. In his edition of *Histories* Book 1 (Paris, 1959), p. 79.

13. *The World of Tacitus* (London, 1968), p. 124 (now also in his Mentor translation of the *Histories*).

14. The point is clearly though laboriously made by Murphy (see n. 6): "he who conquers will be armed with power to commit still greater crimes and prove himself the worst."

15. The word is Scott's, *Religion and Philosophy*, p. 6.

take place indicates how far Tacitus was from wishing to impose a theory upon events.[16]

We may ask another question. Why did Tacitus in his early sixties turn from the subject of recent history, which in *Histories* 1. 1 he says he has reserved for his old age, and push his researches back to the period of the *Annals?* Michel[17] supposes that he was simply avoiding topics which touched too nearly on the policy of reigning emperors, in particular the succession of Hadrian. This was no doubt true, but there was surely a positive motive as well. If Tacitus was preoccupied with the question of an emperor's character, the most enigmatic of emperors was Tiberius, on whom hinged all the history of the century after him. And in research for the *Annals*, the clarity and confidence of the *Histories* seem to have been lost. For, although the *Histories* may be called a study in incoherence, it is itself a marvelously coherent and affirmative work. Looking back on the earlier period of the *Annals*, Tacitus appears to have lost this power of affirmation, and the certainty of touch which makes the *Histories*' narrative so powerful and its language so assured.

Blackburn

16. Pliny in *Panegyricus* 24. 1 was more sweeping, exempting only Trajan from deterioration. R. T. Bruère points out this difference in his authoritative article in *CP* 49 (1954): 161 ff., which analyzes with great acuteness the use made by Tacitus of Pliny, in the *Histories* and elsewhere.

17. *Tacite et le destin de l'Empire*, p. 96.