

Interpretation

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A Discourse on the Beginning of Tacitus's *Histories*

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PREFATORY REMARKS

The following commentary on the first eleven chapters of Tacitus's *Histories* draws its inspiration from Thomas Hobbes's "Discourse on the beginning of Tacitus." That Discourse, which treats the first four chapters of Tacitus's *Annals*, struck me as providing an impressively clear account and a remarkably insightful exposition of the major themes of Tacitus's political science of empire. But the *Histories* was Tacitus's first extensive historical writing, and it seems reasonable to expect that the mature senator and former consul would have endeavored to convey his chief insights into the politics of the Roman Empire on the first occasion of his writing a long and detailed history. In consequence, I thought that a commentary on the introductory chapters of the *Histories*, similar in its approach to Hobbes's on the *Annals*, might also shed light on the key themes and fundamental purposes of Tacitus's writing of history.

In admiration of Hobbes's mode of commentary, I have sought to imitate it to the extent of my capacity, including translating each section before commenting on it. I have not followed Hobbes's example of transcribing the Latin text before translating it, since I am sure that texts of Tacitus are much more readily available today than in Hobbes's time (and I suspect that a substantially smaller proportion of readers today than of seventeenth-century readers care to see the Latin text).

I have used the text of Tacitus's *Histories*, book 1, edited by Cynthia Damon in the series Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge

University Press, 2003). I am deeply indebted to her excellent scholarly notes, as well as to Ronald Syme's work on Tacitus (especially the two-volume work published in 1958). Passages translated from *Histories* Book I are identified thus: (1.1–2), which means chapter one, sections one through two, each numbered section being either one full sentence or more than one. Sometimes I have broken up the text into smaller portions, in which case, for example, (2.3.1–2) means chapter two, section three, lines one and two. References to other passages in the *Histories* or the *Annals* give the Book number in capital Roman numerals followed by chapter and, usually, section, thus: “*sine ira et studio*” (*Annals* I.1.3).



Tacitus begins his *Histories* by defining his starting point, and he marks the end of his introduction to the *Histories* very clearly—more so than he does in the *Annals*. The first sentence of the *Histories* announces that it begins with the consulships of Servius Galba and Titus Vinius; the last sentence of chapter 11 affirms that the author has completed his account of the state of Roman affairs when Servius Galba and Titus Vinius began their final year.

This whole introduction itself comprises three parts. First, chapter 1 indicates the period of Roman history that Tacitus will deal with, explains why a truthful history of that period does not yet exist, and argues that the reader has reasonable grounds for relying on Tacitus's truthfulness. Second, chapters 2–3 survey the overall character of the times and events with which Tacitus's *Histories* will deal. Third, chapters 4–11 give an account of the state of things in Rome and throughout the Roman world at the outset of the events to be narrated.

My work will start with the consulships of Servius Galba (for the second time) and of Titus Vinius. For many authors have recounted, with equal eloquence and liberty, the eight hundred twenty years of the earlier time after the city's founding, while the affairs of the Roman people were being told; after the war had been fought at Actium and when it was in the interest of peace for all power to be conferred on one man, those great talents came to a halt. At the same time, truth was impaired in several ways, first by ignorance of the republic as something alien, soon by the desire of flattering agreement or on the contrary by hatred against the masters. Thus on neither side, between the hostile and the submissive, was there any care for posterity. (1.1)

Tacitus marks the beginning point of his *Histories* by reference to the two consuls, as annalistic historians of the Roman Republic had been accustomed

to do—even though, as we are informed or reminded almost immediately, after the battle of Actium all power came to be centered in one man. But since an aspect of Augustus's prudent stabilization of Roman governance was to preserve various offices and their names from Rome's republican past (*eadem magistratuum vocabula*, “the same names for the magistracies”: *Annals* I.3.7), it continued to be convenient to label the beginning of a new year with the consuls' names.

The author next shows the need for his historical work on this period of time, by distinguishing between Rome's history under the republic, consisting of the Roman people's affairs (*res*, “things,” “affairs,” “business”), and its history under the empire, rule by one man, which he specifies as beginning with the defeat of Mark Antony's forces by Octavius (later to be called Augustus) at Actium (in 31 BC). Great minds wrote histories of the republican period with both eloquence and liberty in equal measure, but such admirable historical writing ceased with the end of the republic. In explaining why, Tacitus does not elaborate directly on how eloquence or liberty were diminished (in his *Dialogue on Orators* 27.3, the former orator and now poet Maternus asserted that we have fallen even further away from our ancient liberty than from our ancient eloquence). Instead, he turns to discussing how truth broke down. The first cause was ignorance of the republic as something foreign or alien. “Republic” here means, of course, the Roman Republic as distinguished from the later principate or empire; it can also mean “public affairs” or “the commonwealth.” Under the empire, most people no longer have the habit of active civic involvement in the conduct of public affairs; hence, they tend to view the commonwealth as something foreign to them: no longer thoroughly public, but rather the affair of the emperor and his associates. Although no longer possible for most citizens, it is not simply impossible to know the *res publica*, “the commonwealth,” and to promote its good even under the empire: Tacitus praised Agricola, his father-in-law, for finding how to be a great man under a bad emperor, through a judicious combination of *obsequium* (“submissiveness”) and *modestia* (moderation) accompanied by diligence and vigor; he contrasted Agricola with some others whose empty show of liberty and contumacious opposition to the emperor led to an ambitious death of no use to the *res publica* (*Agricola* chap. 42).

Next after ignorance of the commonwealth, two passionate interests or interested passions result in further distortion of the truth: on one hand, eagerness to flatter; on the other, hatred of one's masters. Neither group of writers—the submissive or the hostile—is moved by a concern for posterity,

which can receive genuine benefit only from truthful history. Tacitus turns then to an analysis of how people react to these two kinds of less than truthful historians.

But you would easily turn away from a writer's ambition; detraction and spite are received with ready ears. For indeed the foul charge of slavishness inheres in flattery, a false appearance of liberty in malice. (1.2)

Tacitus suggests that people find it relatively easy to reject what a flatterer, motivated by fear, ambition, or greed to promote his own interest, has to say or write; the flattering mode is tainted by an evident servility that people find repugnant. On the other hand, we are more prone to relish malicious tales. People doubtless take a special delight in hearing evil of others, in comparison with whom they can thus more easily praise themselves. And of course there are innumerable censorious stories to tell, given the immense diversity of kinds of bad character and evil deeds. The teller of malicious tales proceeds without flattery and his critiques seem free-spirited; Tacitus, however, holds that the appearance of liberty in spiteful narration is spurious. The historian moved by malicious passion is no freer than one in the grip of greed or ambition; from all these passions truth suffers.

Tacitus then addresses his own case to suggest grounds for the reader's confidence in his own impartial regard for truth.

I would not deny that our high rank was begun by Vespasian, increased by Titus, and advanced further still by Domitian; but those who profess an uncorrupted faithfulness must speak of no one influenced by love and must speak without hatred. (1.3)

The author acknowledges the three Flavian emperors under and therefore through whom his political career began and advanced. This statement is, as we might say today, a full disclosure. How can the reader feel, from this disclosure, confidence in Tacitus's impartial commitment to the truth? On one hand, the historian's reference to his political advancement, which culminated in the highest office of consul, shows that he can have no ambition for a higher office. This provides some assurance in regard to the distorting motive of ambition. But what about hatred? Tacitus deals with this by making what one could call a profession of faith, or rather of faithfulness to truth, and he clearly states his conviction that this commitment to truth entails speaking without being moved by love or hatred. This cannot mean that the author (or the reader) does not experience love or hatred when contemplating the narrated deeds of admirable or vicious men and women; rather, it must mean that what the author says is not caused or brought into being by

such passions, but by the impartial rational discernment of the actual facts about action, circumstances, and characters.

Tacitus might well be moved to inquire into this period of Roman history simply through a desire to know and to understand. Publication of his historical writings, however, needs additional motivation, such as love of lasting fame or the desire to benefit posterity through promulgating knowledge of the politics of empire. In fact, these two possible motivations coincide, for how could one deserve lasting fame as a political historian except by benefiting posterity through making truths available? Tacitus thus joins the historical tradition of Thucydides, who sought to make his history not a pleasing amusement for the moment but a valuable possession for all time. To be valuable for all time, historical writings must bring to light perennial truths about human nature and activity and be in that sense philosophic.

Tacitus chooses to end chapter 1, the first part of his introduction, with a personal digression about his intentions, as a historian, for the future.

So if life enough is supplied, I have set aside for my old age the principate of divine Nerva and the imperial rule of Trajan—richer and more secure material—with the rare happiness of times [*rara temporum felicitate*] when it is permitted for you to think what you will, and what you think, to say. (1.4)

With this statement Tacitus confirms what one could infer from his disclosure of the emperors under whom his own political career advanced: Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian; since the reason for naming them is to address the question of the historian's truthful impartiality, one infers that Tacitus's *Histories*, whose beginning he marked unambiguously, will include the reigns of those three emperors who came after the year of the three emperors. Now his declaration that he will set aside the reigns of Nerva and Trajan for his old age confirms that the *Histories* will stop with the end of Domitian's reign.

In calling the better times under Nerva and Trajan “a richer material” (*uberiorem materiam*), Tacitus seems to mean that they were more productive of good things; in calling them “more secure” (*securiorem*)—that is, freer from cares, safer—Tacitus may mean safer for all those living in those times, or safer for one writing about those times, or both. In the *Dialogue on Orators* (3.2), Julius Secundus suggests that Maternus might revise his play *Cato* by removing those things that might have given matter (*materiam*) for a distorted interpretation (*pravae interpretationi*), so as to publish a “*Cato* that is

not indeed better, but nevertheless safer [*securiorem*]; here in the *Dialogue*, “safer” refers to the safety of the writer.

With this statement of his future plans for historical writing, Tacitus thus also announces his partial fulfillment of an intention expressed near the beginning of his first writing, *Agricola*. In chapter 2 of that work he had recalled examples of historical authors condemned and their books burned; those responsible for these deeds “thought, no doubt, that in that fire the voice of the Roman people and the liberty of the senate and the awareness of the human race were obliterated.” Despotism for a time suppressed “the exchange of speaking and hearing. We would have lost memory itself along with voice, if forgetting were as much in our power as being silent.” In the next chapter (which concludes the introduction to the *Agricola*), he celebrates the recovery from all this: Nerva has brought together two previously dissociated things, the principate and liberty; Trajan increases daily the happiness of the times (*felicitatem temporum*). Tacitus concludes chapter 3 by calling this vindication of his father-in-law a first contribution to the work of composing a memorial of earlier servitude and a testimony of present good things. We see that the *Histories* will complete the task of preserving the memory of earlier servitude; the elaboration of present goods is postponed to the historian’s old age. Tacitus did not fulfill this second part of his intention. After completing the *Histories* he wrote the *Annals*, starting with the death of Augustus and going down to the death of Nero. A reader whom Tacitus rubbed the wrong way might wish to infer that the historian took greater delight in writing hostile criticisms than in narrating good deeds. It seems more reasonable, however, to surmise that, after completing the *Histories*, he found it to be more important, to a deeper and more complete understanding of Roman imperial rule, to go back to the succession to Augustus and the development of governance under the Julio-Claudian dynasty rather than forward to the rare happiness of times under Nerva and Trajan. And for a historian concerned with truths that depend on the preservation of memory, which despotic power may wish to distort or destroy, surely the more pressing task is to record deeds whose distortion or obliteration others may have an interest in bringing about.

This first chapter ends with a memorable short phrase specifying an essential aspect of happy times: *ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*, “when it is permitted for you to think what you will, and what you think, to say.” This is an example of an oft-noted feature of Tacitus’s style: to conclude sections of his narration with memorable sentences or phrases—epigrams or

sententiae—which are concise, polished, often antithetical, of deep human interest and broad application, always provocative, and frequently shocking or paradoxical in content. It is worth underlining that the subject of this first epigrammatic phrase is liberty of thought and expression; Tacitus thus gives a certain pride of place to his concern for liberty. That the formulation is memorable is demonstrated by numerous later references to it, such as Machiavelli's in Book I, chapter 10 of his *Discourses on Livy*.

Tacitus has already let his readers know something about the quality of the times that he will write about: they are less rich in good things (and thus, one might well expect, fuller of evils) and less secure than better times that would follow. Now in the second section of his introduction (chapters 2–3), he provides some vivid details to characterize the historical period as a whole.

I advance toward a work abounding in disasters, dreadful in battles, discordant with seditions, savage even in peace itself. Four emperors cut down by iron, threefold civil wars, more external wars, and many mixed ones. Affairs were prosperous in the East, adverse in the West: Illyricum disturbed, the several parts of Gaul wavering, Britain subjugated and at once let go. The tribes of the Sarmatians and the Suebians risen up against us; Dacia renowned for mutual slaughters; the arms of the Parthians all but stirred up by the ridiculous sham of a false Nero. (2.1)

The brief catalogue of events highlights deeds of violence: wars, civil wars, violent deaths of emperors, and savagery even in peace. Tacitus surveys the whole Roman Empire, first east to west starting with just across the Adriatic from Italy, via Gaul, to Britain; and then back from the far west to the far east, from Britain to German tribes and via Dacia towards the Parthians beyond the eastern borders of the empire. Although Tacitus mentions prosperity in the East, his enumeration is entirely given to disturbances—except for the case of Britain, where Rome met with military success, but then, as the author puts it with exaggeration or rather with some oversimplification, immediately let the subjected lands go.

After this brief overview of the period and the whole geographic scene, Tacitus turns to the center of empire, Italy, and then to the city itself of Rome.

And now Italy was battered by calamities—new or recurring after a long sequence of generations. Cities swallowed up or buried on the most fertile shore of Campania. And the city itself laid waste by fires, with the most ancient shrines burnt up, the Capitol itself kindled by the hands of citizens. Ceremonies polluted, great adulteries. The sea full of exiles, cliffs stained with slaughter. (2.2)

From this catalogue of calamities, the author shows how heterogeneous causes, nature and human action, bring about similarly destructive effects. Volcanic destruction from Mount Vesuvius is imitated by the incendiary violence of men. One might expect that such human disorder would be limited by reverence for the divine, but Tacitus shows this expectation to be false, or at least frequently disappointed: ancient shrines and the Capitol itself are consumed by fire from human agency, religious rites are polluted, and adulteries violate the most basic divinely ordained human tie, that of marriage. The transgression of religious obligations and prohibitions marks the extreme degree of human evil-doing. These evils, like a powerful eruption, expel exiles onto the sea and stain cliffs with blood—perhaps cliffs at the sea's edge where men pursued with violence fall to their deaths.

The author next elaborates moral dimensions of these evil times in the city itself: Savagery more bitter still in the city: nobility, wealth, offices of honor whether passed over or undertaken, amounted to an accusation; and ruin was most certain on account of virtues. (2.3.1–2)

Things that normally are desired and beneficial—nobility, wealth, honorable political office—in evil times become sources of danger and ruin. Normally, good things such as wealth are secured to the possessor by laws, order, and moral practices in a civil society; thus even though one's goods are envied and coveted by others, one can normally be safe in the possession and enjoyment of them. But amidst disorders, these goods bring danger, and thus goods become, in these circumstances, effectually bad. The epitome of all this is that virtues, normally the dispositions of character and modes of action that constitute our happiness, become instead causes of ruin.

The most complete disorder in a society is doubtless civil war, and the first books of Tacitus's *Histories*, with the rapid succession by violence of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian, do certainly treat a period of civil war. The account of how good things become transformed into evils and how virtues produce ruin rather than well-being remind one of Thucydides's classic account of the moral consequences of civil war (in his discussion of civil disorder in Corcyra, in the third book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*): the words used to refer to virtues and vices change their meanings in such disordered circumstances. But Tacitus does not appear to limit his judgment on these matters to the period of civil war; he seems rather to let it apply to later parts of his *Histories* as well: when bad rule by an emperor—tyranny—brings about similar consequences. Tyranny resembles civil war in its effects, for a tyrant—in the classic analyses of Plato, for example, and as Tacitus had

already depicted it in his remarks about Domitian in *Agricola*—typically feels threatened by excellence of any sort and acts with corresponding distrustful hostility toward persons of outstanding virtue and distinction. Lawlessness and insecurity characterize tyranny as well as periods of civil strife.

Further details of civil and moral disorder follow: The rewards of the accusers were no less hated than their crimes; for some, having obtained priesthoods and consulships as spoils, and others procuratorships and internal power, moved and turned all things with hatred and terror. (2.3.3–5)

Those who most notably receive benefit from the rule of tyrannical emperors are now names: *delatores* (informers and accusers). Rome (like ancient Athens) did not have official government prosecutors, but left it to citizens to bring charges against malefactors. Under the empire, the charge of *maiestas*—opposition to the emperor—if resulting in condemnation, would give substantial rewards to the accuser (typically one-fourth of the condemned person's entire estate). Tacitus asserts that such accusers also were rewarded with religious and political offices; the highest positions in society (apart from the emperor's) were obtained like spoils of war through nefarious activities carried out as judicial proceedings—great evils already noted by our author in his *Agricola* and *Dialogue*. Procuratorships were positions of governance of Rome's far-flung provinces under the emperor's direction; *interioriem potentiam*, "interior power," by contrast, denotes power in Rome and perhaps more particularly, power within the emperor's network of close associates ("power behind the scenes"). The corruption of political and moral standards came to such a point that abroad and at home, in politics and in religion, the most despicable kinds of persons prevailed, and conducted affairs for the worse in such a way as to evoke both fear and hatred from all others.

Turning from the public domain to the household, Tacitus asserts: Slaves were corrupted against their masters, freed men against patrons. And those who lacked an enemy were crushed by friends. (2.3.6–7)

Since Tacitus indicates no additional agent of corruption, he lets us see that the disorder in the public sphere affects the private sphere as well; the household's mode of existence is closely related to and perhaps ultimately dependent on the moral tenor of the political society. Accustomed as we now are to holding slavery to be contrary to natural rights and the moral judgment of all nations, we might well ask: Why on earth should slaves not turn against their masters? But in the ancient Roman world, where the institution

of slavery was virtually universal and hence viewed as normal, it was not unusual to expect certain ties of loyalty between slave and master. All the more so would a freed man be expected to display grateful loyalty to a former master, now a patron. This overturning of normal moral conditions, elaborated throughout the second chapter, is underlined by Tacitus's antithetical and paradoxical concluding sentence. Just as virtues in these perverse circumstances become causes of ruin instead of elements of happiness, so one is crushed rather than supported by those one took for friends.

Such dissolution of all human bonds and moral ties was not, to be sure, universal, as Tacitus proceeds to affirm.

The era was not, however, so barren of virtues as not to bring forth good examples. Mothers accompanied fugitive sons; wives followed husbands into exile. There were brave near-relatives, constant sons-in-law, faithfulness of slaves defiant even against tortures. The final necessities of famous men: the necessity itself borne courageously and their ends equal to the praised deaths of the ancients. (3.1)

The author shows us that private ties of family relationship can hold up, however exceptionally, against the corrupting influence of public degradation. The good examples are of actions taken privately, not in a public capacity. Good examples performed by public figures ("famous men") are not political actions in the full sense but are the courageous acceptance and enduring of death (instead, one infers, of base conduct that could perhaps have prolonged one's life).

Tacitus concludes this chapter, and therewith the second of three parts of the *Histories*' introduction, with a broadening of the picture from human events to the whole world of nature and gods.

Beyond the manifold accidents of human affairs: prodigies in heaven and on land, and the warnings of thunderbolts, and portents of future things—happy and sad, ambiguous and manifest. For never indeed has it been proven by more dreadful calamities of the Roman people and by more just signs that our security is not of concern to the gods, but our punishment is. (3.2)

Up to this point, Tacitus has spoken only of human actions and their consequences, with the sole exception of a reference to cities on the shore of Campania buried (by the famous volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius). Now he briefly opens up the narrative space to include our whole world—heaven and earth—within which we can see indications of divine governance: various

signs point toward future events and remarkable disasters amount to punishment of the whole Roman people for their contemptible and unjust deeds.

Lightning bolts and other meteorological phenomena are of course traditionally thought, in Rome as in ancient Greece and elsewhere, to convey messages (such as warnings and threats) or to inflict punishments from gods. This common view has also been criticized, satirized, and rejected for centuries—as early as in Aristophanes's *Clouds*, for instance, or, more relevantly to the Roman context, in Lucretius's poem *De rerum natura*. Lucretius presents Epicurus's materialist teaching as enhancing the peaceful pleasures of life by freeing one from fear of punitive gods. Men, according to Lucretius, came to believe in gods from a deep-seated need, in the face of irregular and violent natural occurrences, for reassurance of the permanence of our world; but then they attribute threatening violent events in the world to the gods' anger at human misdeeds and thus afflict themselves with false fears. By contrast, Tacitus here emphatically evokes the belief in divine punishment; indeed, he affirms that security or reassurance is no concern of the gods at all, only punishment is. This view in one way can seem deeply pessimistic: no aid or support, but only punishment, comes from the gods. The immediate rhetorical effect of this epigram is to underline the depths of disaster and misery prevalent in the events to be narrated in the history. But in another way, this view could be taken so as to have a positive aspect: the disorders, crimes, and harms that men inflict on one another are not random accidents or morally indifferent necessities of human nature; beings more powerful than men are concerned to make manifest the character of human evil through punishing it. Certainly this traditionally held notion does not guarantee good conduct from all men, but it may well have some degree of influence for the better on many, and Tacitus here affirms rather than debunks it. Whether he himself accepts the view here evoked is uncertain at this point: we need to observe whether the historian appeals to divine causes in the details of his historical narrative or whether his inquiry finds adequate explanation of events in human nature at work in the variations of human circumstances and motivations.

Tacitus turns from this overall characterization of the events that his *Histories* will treat to the third and longest part of his introduction:

Well then, before I set down the things destined, it seems that it is needful to go back to examine of what sort the condition of the city was, what the mind of the armies was, what the disposition of the provinces was, what in the whole orb of lands was sound and what

sickly—so that not only the happenings and outcomes of things, which are mostly matters of chance, but also the rational account and causes may be known. (4.1)

Through this compact sentence Tacitus reveals the character and purpose of his historical writing. It is not only to record truly the deeds of the period he has determined to cover (for reasons noted earlier), but also to find the *ratio* (the rational account, the explanation) and the causes of things. If events are largely fortuitous, as Tacitus asserts here, it is hard to see how one can come to a rational and causal understanding. The author must therefore mean something like this: that underlying the apparent or evident vagaries of fortune lies a thread or threads of causation that reason can bring to light. Tacitus thus has a purpose that belongs as much to political science or philosophy as it does to historical narrative.

Tacitus gives us three specific topics and one general survey topic to examine in the search for causes and a rational account: the status of the city, the mind of the armies, the disposition of the provinces, and, fourth, the all-inclusive categories of what is well and what is sickly in the whole world. The city of Rome comes first: the center of empire, locus of the Senate and people of Rome and—usually—the residence of the emperor. Second is the armies—or more specifically, their “mind.” What did the several armies think about the present situation, what did they hope for and fear, what did they intend to do? The second of the three specific topics is the most important: armies, present in both city and provinces, hold the empire together. Third, the provinces—the result of Roman conquests over centuries, thus the material evidence of Roman military excellence and skilled capacity for governance; and also now the crucial source of resources, most notably grain, to sustain the Italian center of empire. The fourth topic could be taken to point to inquiry into the world situation beyond Rome and its provinces. But in fact Tacitus does not take that route of inquiry here; instead, the fourth topic indicates the guiding character of his survey of the preceding three—Rome, armies, and provinces. In the search for the causes of events, the key is understanding what is sound and what is sickly throughout the empire. The philosophic historian thus likens his task to that of a doctor, similarly to the well-known analogy between the doctor and the true practitioner of the political art evoked in Plato’s *Gorgias*—an analogy recalled to different effect in Machiavelli’s comparison of successful Roman generals-statesmen to knowledgeable doctors (in chapter 3 of *The Prince*). It is worth noting that

Tacitus does not mention any divine agency, such as divine intentions to chastise men for their misdeeds, in this survey of the causes of events.

The remainder of chapter 4 proceeds to sketch the condition of the city, beginning with a general statement that applies not only to the city but also to the armies:

As the end of Nero had been happy at the first surge of people's rejoicing, so it had stirred up various motions of the spirits not only in the city among senators or people or urban soldiery but also among all the legions and generals—the secret of imperial rule having been widely divulged, that an emperor can be made elsewhere than in Rome. (4.2)

Tacitus tells how the initial reaction to the death of Nero was joyful, but that the event then caused a diversity of responses, which he calls various motions of the spirits (*varios motus animorum*, a somewhat unusual phrase reminiscent of Lucretius or Virgil). *Animus*, here translated “spirit,” and *mens*, translated in 4.1 as “mind,” are generally synonymous; *mens* has sometimes perhaps a bit more emphasis on thinking or planning and *animus* more emphasis on emotions, spiritedness, or disposition. The first reaction was one of joy, but then—the reference to time elapsed suggests that some reflection on likely consequences may have taken place—a diversity of reactions emerged: a consequence of the widespread revelation of a (or the) secret of empire. The Latin text is indeterminate as to whether what is involved here is *a* secret of empire or *the* secret of empire. Given its central importance—who rules as emperor—one might opt for “the secret”; but Tacitus does elsewhere apply the phrase to other key aspects of imperial governance, so it is perhaps sounder to say “a secret.”

This “secret of empire” is that an emperor (*princeps*) can be made elsewhere than at Rome. A secret that has been widely divulged (*divulgato*: spread out among the *vulgus*, the common people) is of course no longer a secret. This memorable *sententia* thus has an antithetical or even paradoxical aspect. The secret of empire was, of course, well known to Augustus (and his successors), but Augustus did his best to keep it secret by using the old republican names for Roman political offices (*eadem magistratum vocabula*), as did Tiberius in beginning his time as emperor by making gestures of apparent deference to the Senate. Other intelligent political actors and observers would also not have been in the dark. But now even people of the meanest capacity are able to see this fact—this basic cause and rationale of Roman empire.

Turning from the reactions to Nero's death and to the newly publicized knowledge of the formerly hidden foundation of imperial power, Tacitus quickly surveys the state of mind of several classes of Romans in the capital city:

But the senators were happy, making use of liberty at once and with the less restraint as toward a new and absent emperor; nearest to the joy of the senators were the more prominent equestrians; the sound part of the people and those connected to the great families, the clients and freed men of the condemned and the exiles, were roused to hope; the disreputable plebeians accustomed to the circus and theaters, and likewise the worst of the slaves, or those who, having consumed their resources, were nourished by Nero's shameful actions, were sad and greedy for rumors. (4.3)

Senators (*patres*) are the topmost social-political class. In the past, the Senate exercised decisive political power in Rome's mixed republican regime. Emperors might sometimes or often appear to defer to the Senate, but at other times they ruled more openly, with senators displaying varying degrees of submissiveness. Tacitus's formulation of the senators' use of recovered liberty, the less restrained or more licentious (*licentius*) because the emperor (*princeps*) is new and absent, evokes the notion of slaves testing the limits of a new or an absent master (*dominus*). The long time elapsed since the Senate truly ruled has produced general inexperience in the proper use of liberty and political power; the senators taken as a group are no longer capable of self-government. Below the senatorial class are the equestrians, whose role in the administration of the empire had tended to increase over its near-century-long existence. The joy of their foremost members approaches that of the senators; the suggestion seems to be that the more political prominence one had, the more one would rejoice at the death of so bad an emperor as Nero. The next group, made hopeful by his death, is more heterogeneous: the sound part of the populace and the part connected to the great families, plus clients and freedmen of exiles and people condemned (presumably to other sentences than exile). The author's brevity here leaves us uncertain whether the sound part of the people consists only of those connected to the great families, or whether others too among the people belong to that sound group. In contrast, others are saddened by Nero's death and greedy for rumors: dissatisfaction and grief lead people, naturally enough, to want something different and thus to open themselves to believing rumors—however little based on fact—that hold forth more pleasing prospects. Disappointment and sorrow can breed credulity. This group of the dissatisfied is a mixed one: the

lower sort of plebeians used to circuses and shows provided by Nero, the worst of the slaves, and profligates who have come to depend for sustenance on Nero's shameful prodigality.

Tacitus displays here, as in many other places, a concern with how circumstances and attendant emotions affect how people think about things. Just as here he notes that sorrow tends to make people eager to believe rumors, so later he observes that fear leads people to interpret odd events as omens. Writing of a moment when Otho is emperor in Rome and preparing to lead troops northward to meet the invasion of legions supporting Vitellius, he reports that "prodigies publicized by various authorities spread terror"; having mentioned some of them, he adds "and many others that are observed in primitive centuries even in peace, which now are heard of only amidst fear" (86.1). Tacitus, like Thucydides (for instance in chapters 8 and 53–54 of Book II and in his famous characterization of the Corcyrean civil strife in Book III), observes that fear and dangerous circumstances lead men to interpret things differently. There are all kinds of odd, chance events that only primitive men would pay attention to in peacetime; but in fearful circumstances, even more civilized or sophisticated men will hold such things to be significant. No wonder, then, that the catalogue of terrible events that the author announced as the subject of his historical narration concluded with reference to unusual numbers of prodigies, warnings, and divine punishments (3.2). And again, the fact that the Tiber's flooding blocked an intended route of Otho's advance "was turned away from fortuitous and natural causes to a prodigy and an omen of looming disasters" (86.3). Being aware of the human tendency to interpret events variously in accordance with the different emotions of diverse circumstances, Tacitus himself, one infers, would be free of that tendency. He would not be one to substitute omens and prodigies for fortuitous and natural causes in his own thinking.

Tacitus now turns to the soldiers in the city and thus smoothly links the topic of the city's condition with the topic of the mind of the armies:

The urban soldiery, steeped in a long-standing oath to the Caesars, had been brought over to abandoning Nero by art and impulse rather than by their own inclination. After they understood that the donative promised in Galba's name was not given, that there was not the same place for great merits and rewards in peace that there is in war, and that gratitude with one made emperor by the legions was forestalled, they were inclined toward revolutionary change [*novas res*] and, on top of that, troubled by the crime of the prefect Nymphidius Sabinus's seeking imperial power for himself. (5.1)

“Urban soldiery” (*miles urbanus*, literally “the urban soldier”) here refers to members of the praetorian guards (although the term could include members of the urban cohorts, who shared the same camp), as is made clear by the reference to Nymphidius Sabinus (the praetorian prefect), who had attempted a coup to make himself emperor. In years past, the praetorian guards had proclaimed Claudius emperor after the killing of Caligula in AD 41. Upon the death of Claudius in AD 54, Nero was presented first to the camp of the praetorians and proclaimed emperor there, where he promised a donative as Claudius had done. “The decrees of the senators followed the judgment of the soldiers,” that is, the praetorians (*Annals* XII.69). Emperors had always been proclaimed by the Senate at Rome, but the praetorians could truly consider their power in this regard to be great indeed. But now the significance of Galba’s having been proclaimed emperor by legions in Spain is sinking in. Galba has not distributed the promised largesse to the praetorians; a peaceful succession promises little reward for them; and the foundation of Galba’s power in legions other than the praetorian guards bodes ill for the possibility of their winning favor from the new emperor in the future. All those things, together with a guilty conscience occasioned by their prefect’s coup attempt against Galba (even though the praetorians had not supported Nymphidius in this), make them ready for revolution. (The Latin *novae res*, “new things,” can mean political change ranging from sedition, revolt, or rebellion to constitutional change, revolution, regime change. Its frequent use in this political sense suggests the fundamental place of the political among the totality of human things.)

Tacitus proceeds to note yet more decisive difficulties in Galba’s situation in regard to the praetorians:

Nymphidius had indeed been put down at the first attempt, but even though the head of the revolt was removed, a guilty conscience remained in many of the soldiers; nor were speeches lacking of people denouncing Galba’s old age and avarice. His severity, formerly praised and much extolled in soldiers’ talk, distressed those who scorned the old discipline and were accustomed by Nero over fourteen years to love emperors’ vices no less than formerly they revered their virtues. In addition came Galba’s saying—honorable toward the commonwealth, ambivalent for himself—that soldiers were chosen by him, not bought. For other things did not conform to this standard. Titus Vinius and Cornelius Laco—the one the worst of mortals, the other the laziest—pulled the weak old man down, burdened with hatred for the former’s outrages, contempt for the latter’s sloth. (5.2–6.1.3)

Nero was still a young man of thirty at the time of his death in AD 68; Galba's old age seems in contrast unappealing—all the more so when linked to his old-style military discipline, overall severity, and thriftiness. Once again Tacitus brings to the fore the fact that human character and deeds are, and indeed need to be, variously judged in varying circumstances. Galba was of high military repute for his strict discipline, but in respect to praetorian soldiers accustomed to Neronian slackness and largesse, such severity was hated rather than loved. His noble saying about choosing, not buying, his soldiers stands in contrast with the other things going on in that time and place, epitomized in the outrageous behavior of his coconsul, Vinus, and the neglectfulness of Laco, whom Galba had made the new head of the praetorians. Hence the praetorians' reaction to the honorable tone of Galba's saying discounts its noble public-spiritedness and focuses instead on the detriment to their own interest that comes from Galba's stinginess.

At this point Tacitus has completed a sketch of the urban soldier's reaction to the fact of Galba's becoming emperor and to his basic character. The rest of chapters 6 and 7 completes the picture of the praetorians' attitude first through detailing more specific actions and events in the early stages of Galba's accession to imperial rule and then through expanding the analysis of the soldiery in Rome by discussing, in addition to the praetorians, soldiers from other legions who happened for various reasons also to be in Rome at that time.

Galba's route was slow and bloody—the consul-designate, Cingonius Varro, and Petronius Turpilianus, of consular rank, having been killed. The former as an ally of Nymphidius, the latter as Nero's general, perished unheard and undefended, as though innocent. With so many thousands of unarmed soldiers slaughtered, the entrance into the city was ill-starred, of bad omen, and causing fear even to the very ones who did the killing. (6.1.4–6.2.3)

Tacitus does not express judgment on whether it was reasonable for Galba to have Cingonius Varro and Petronius Turpilianus put to death; his indication of their respective links to Nymphidius Sabinus and to Nero suggests possible grounds for such measures. His words on the manner of their execution, however, suggest an important political consideration: that an emperor needs to take account of the appearances of justice or injustice. A killing, even if reasonable because needed to establish power, requires justification, or else the person executed may be seen as an innocent victim. Machiavelli elaborates this point in the middle of chapter 17 of *The Prince*, with his assertion that if a prince needs to kill someone, “he must do it when there

is suitable justification and manifest cause for it.” Along with the killing of these two prominent men, Galba’s army slaughtered many unarmed soldiers. Tacitus does not go into any details here (that it involved marines—from the fleet—who had gone to meet the emperor to press on him their demands); the relevant point for his account at this point is the incident’s effect on people’s perceptions: the new emperor’s entry is ill-omened indeed. Finally, the author asserts without further explanation that even the soldiers who did the killing are themselves made fearful by it. One may understand this as a consequence of the overall impression of ill omen that the event inspires in all, spectators and actors alike—the sense of ill omen resting on a notion of some superhuman power that affects human affairs, for example by punishing unjust deeds. Or one could say that excessive slaughter makes even the slaughterers feel the increased possibility of being subjected to some similar fate themselves. Hence increased fearfulness, unease, bad conscience, expectation of evil.

Next Tacitus turns to some other soldiers, who would usually be elsewhere but at this time were in the capital:

The Spanish legion having been led in, the legion that Nero had conscripted from the fleet remaining, the city was full of an unwonted army. In addition to this were many detachments from Germany and Britain and Illyricum, whom Nero likewise had selected and sent ahead to the Caspian gates and the war that he was preparing against the Albani, and then had recalled them to put down the attempts of Vindex. Huge material for revolution—not with eager favor towards any one person but prepared for someone of daring. (6.2.4–6.2.9)

Here (and through the end of chapter 7) Tacitus is still discussing attitudes in the city of Rome; but just as his earlier introduction of urban soldiery anticipated inquiry into the minds of the armies, so here the discussion of legions from the provinces such as Spain anticipates inquiry into the condition of the provinces. One could say that an orderly and analytical historical narrative needs to make clear and helpful divisions in its subject matter, but in political reality, separate divisions overlap and interpenetrate each other, all the more confusedly as overall circumstances are in flux and less well-ordered. The city holds more regular soldiers than is normal: the Spanish legion led in by Galba, but also troops initially sent out by Nero for war to the northeast, but recalled to fight against the rebellion begun by Julius Vindex in Gaul—a rebellion that was in fact put down by legions based in upper Germany led by Verginius Rufus. Much movement of troops, into and out

of Rome and back; everything in flux; a new emperor unable to stabilize the situation: surely a time ripe for more revolution.

The last chapter on the situation in the city, chapter 7, turns first to evoke the report in the city of Rome of events in the two provinces of Africa and of Germany:

By chance it happened that the killings of Clodius Macer and Fonteius Capito were reported at the same time. The procurator Trebonius Garutianus killed Macer, who without any doubt was rebelling in Africa, at Galba's order; the legates of the legions, Cornelius Aquinus and Fabius Valens, killed Capito in Germany, when he was attempting similar things, before they were ordered. (7.1)

Clodius Macer, Nero's legate in command of the legion in Africa (west of Egypt), had sought to do what Galba had done. Procurators were officials of the imperial civil administration; the procurator's successful killing of the legion's commander marks a notable step in consolidation of Galba's power. Capito was governor of lower Germany ("lower" meaning further down the Rhine) when killed by two legates of legions. In addition to noting differences in the positions of the actors involved, Tacitus takes note of this important difference: Macer was killed in accordance with an order from Galba, whereas the two carried out their killing on their own initiative, before being ordered.

This circumstance regarding the killing of Capito provides the first occasion of many in his histories where Tacitus gives a version of events, or an interpretation, held by some but not by others:

There were those who believed that Capito, though foul and stained by avarice and lust, held back from the planning of revolution; but that the accusation and deception were put together by the legates, after they were unable to drive him on to the war that they were urging; and that Galba ratified these things either because of inconstancy of mind, or in order not to investigate things more deeply, however they had been done, since they could not be changed. However that may be, both killings were taken unfavorably, and to an emperor once hated, things done well or badly bring along equal hatred. (7.2)

Concerning many historical events—both major ones and lesser details—it is difficult and often impossible to know what really happened, when conflicting accounts have been handed down. Since this is the first event in the *Histories* concerning which Tacitus has chosen to give us competing narratives, it seems reasonable to analyze its meaning in some detail. In version

one, Capito (doubtless inspired by Galba's example) sought to take steps to have himself proclaimed emperor; the vigilant legates of the legions, in loyalty to Galba (and no doubt hoping to win favor from him), immediately put down the attempted revolution. In version two, the two legates sought to persuade Capito to proclaim himself emperor with their support (doubtless motivated by the desire to be powerful associates of a new emperor who would have gained imperial power on their initiative and with their support); when he declined to act, they put him to death (no doubt fearing that he might ruin them by revealing their proposition to Galba, so as to win Galba's favor). Which version is true? Tacitus does not tell us, either because he does not know or because he chooses not to tell. If the latter, it might be because the difference, in Tacitus's judgment, is not crucially important: either version conveys significant facts about the character of unsettled times in an autocracy, where the supreme power's being up for grabs makes it difficult to know who can be trusted and how one can secure one's position, indeed one's life. The second version is a more complex narrative of corruption and deception; it illustrates the dangers for whoever suggests conspiracy first; but declining to conspire can lead the endangered first proposers to assure themselves against accusation by killing the very one they proposed to head the conspiracy. The political teaching of this first double narrative contains the core of Machiavelli's discussion in the longest chapter of his *Discourses on Livy*, chapter 6 of Book III, "On Conspiracies." To complete the complexity of this double narrative, the second version suggests two variant explanations of Galba's ratifying acceptance of the killing of Capito: either he acted out of *mobilitas animi*, "inconstancy of mind," or he decided not to look any further into the things that had been done, which could not in any event be undone, so as to seem to have been in control of what had gone on.

The third part of chapter 7 concludes the analysis of the state of things in the city with a sketch of people's overall political-moral view of the situation:

Everything up for sale; freedmen of excessive power; the hands of slaves greedy for unexpected things and hastening to it as one might expect in the case of an old man; the same evils in the new court, equally serious, not equally excused. Galba's very age was a matter for ridicule and disgust to those accustomed to Nero's youth and to those who, as is the custom of the vulgar crowd, compared emperors with respect to form and attractiveness of body. (7.3)

With these concluding statements on the state of things in the city, Tacitus takes up from a somewhat different point of view the comparison of Galba's and Nero's rule with which he began discussion of this topic. There (4.2–3)

he had reported the varying reactions of different social groups to the death of Nero; here, he analyzes the generally popular view of the current emperor and how he compares with the previous one. Though famed for strict military discipline and frugality, Galba heads an imperial administration that is venal and corrupt and in which the power of freemen and the abuses of slaves (presumably those in the emperor's household and perhaps those belonging to powerful associates of the emperor) kindle the resentment of ordinary citizens. We are told about how the common run of citizens tend to judge things on the basis of superficial, physical appearances; in this regard they judge Galba's old age and bodily defects unfavorably in comparison to Nero's youth and good looks.

Announcing the completion of his analysis of the state of the city (and therewith of the mind of armies in the city), Tacitus turns to the final topic of this introductory survey of the reason for and the causes of events, the condition of the provinces (and, perhaps the most important fact about each province, the state of mind of the legions based there):

And this, then, was the disposition of minds in Rome—as one might expect in so great a multitude. As to the provinces, in Spain Cluvius Rufus was in charge—an eloquent man, endowed with arts of peace, but inexperienced in wars. The Gauls, above and beyond the memory of Vindex, were bound by the recent gift of Roman citizenship and the reduction of tribute for the future. The communities of the Gauls nearest the German armies, however, were not held in the same honor; indeed certain of them had been deprived of some territory; they appraised others' advantages and their own injuries with equal pain. (8.1)

Tacitus begins with the southwest limit of the empire in Europe, Spain, and proceeds, by and large, clockwise around the Mediterranean. Spain, where Galba had been proclaimed emperor and from which he had led his Spanish legion to make good his claim in Rome, is now quiet, governed by a man unlikely to initiate any military enterprise. Gaul, however, had been the scene of recent turmoil: the rebellion led by Julius Vindex (mentioned already in chapter 6). Vindex appealed for support to other governors; he did not receive such support (and Galba in Spain hesitated to support him) and was put down, but his supporters were honored by Galba after the fact for having opposed Nero. *Galliae* ("The Gauls") refers to the three parts of Gaul into which the Romans divided the whole territory. Tacitus indicates here a source of difficulty in governing Gaul: in so large a territory it makes sense (and may even be necessary) to deal differently with different subgroups. It would be difficult and costly to govern a large territory oppressively, with

harsh methods alone, so it makes sense to try to win support from some of the governed through providing benefits (at the limit, citizenship). Such an approach is in fact necessary if, like the Romans, you need to use manpower from subdued lands to provide adequate military forces for your imperial expansion or even maintenance. Such differences in treatment among subgroups, however, cannot fail to provoke resentments from those not favored or less favored. The dangers occasioned by such resentments are very likely the underlying cause for Tacitus's having described the several parts of Gaul during the whole period of his narrative as "wavering" (2.1).

Tacitus moves on from the territories of Gaul to Germany, whose unsettled and contested western border with the Roman Empire at that time was roughly the Rhine and southern border the Danube, and especially to the Roman legions based there:

The German armies—something most dangerous amidst such great forces—were troubled and angered, with pride in their recent victory and with fear on the grounds that they had favored other parties. They had defected from Nero late, nor was Verginius at once for Galba. There was doubt whether he did not wish to rule as emperor; it was agreed that imperial rule was offered to him by the soldiery. Even those who could not complain about the killing of Fonteius Capito were indignant. A leader was lacking, Verginius having been withdrawn under a pretense of friendship. They regarded his not being sent back, and even being called a guilty party, as though it was a criminal accusation against them. (8.2)

In his earlier writing *Germania*, Tacitus had emphasized the special importance of Rome's interactions with Germany by asserting that Roman attempts to conquer Germany had been going on for 210 years (down to Trajan's second consulship), with vast losses on both sides (*Germania* 37). Here, he limns the situation and sentiments of the armies in Germany, all of which add up to a state of dissatisfaction and hence instability. In the turmoil up to this point, the Roman armies feel pride in their strength and accomplishment—under the command of Verginius Rufus they put down the revolt of Julius Vindex—but unease about the future. Under the leadership of Verginius, they had stood by Nero at first and supported Galba only rather late; hence they could not be cheerful in looking to his emperorship. But their previous leader had been led away as a member of Galba's entourage—with a pretense of friendship but, in reality, in order to separate a possibly dangerous challenger from troops inclined to provide him support. The armies are then anxious about what lies ahead, but without a respected leader to direct them.

Tacitus then turns, naturally enough, to the actual army leaders at that moment in Germany:

The upper army despised their legate, Hordeonius Flaccus—feeble with old age and lameness of feet, without steadiness, without authority. No control even over quiet soldiery; all the more, when they were enraged, were they further stirred up by the weakness of the one holding them back. The legions of lower Germany were without a consular level commander for a rather long time, until, sent by Galba, A. Vitellius was in place—son of the censor (and thrice consul) Vitellius. That seemed enough. (9.1)

Tacitus depicts Hordeonius Flaccus as wholly deficient in qualities crucial for military leadership. Such weak leadership, when the leader attempts to promote restraint or discipline among his soldiers, has the opposite effect of spurring them on to rebellious action. Thus does this description point forward to the upper armies' revolt from Galba with which the *Histories*' narrative proper begins (12.1). As to the armies of lower Germany, their new commander is Aulus Vitellius. Tacitus had already mentioned all the names of the emperors throughout the whole period of his narrative—Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian (1.3). When speaking of the situation in Rome, he did not choose to mention Otho by name. His mention of Vitellius here is necessitated by the plan of his introduction, which includes naming and characterizing the leaders of legions that will play important roles in the events to come, but regarding Vitellius he as yet gives no details. By mentioning only the offices held by Vitellius's father, with the comment that "that seemed to be enough," he leads the reader to surmise that Vitellius had no other serious claim to a position of military leadership.

Having written of Spain, Gaul, and Germany, Tacitus takes brief notice of Britain:

Nothing in the way of angers in the British army—and indeed no other legions acted more innocently throughout all the movements of the civil wars, either because they were far away and separated by the Ocean, or because they were taught by frequent expeditions rather to hate the enemy. (9.2)

The legions in Britain are unsurpassed in innocence (which of course need not mean wholly innocent) during these civil wars of AD 69–70. The reason? Just as earlier Tacitus gave a first instance of two versions of a historical event (7.1–2), so here he gives two different causes of an event, the (at least comparatively) good conduct of the legions in Britain. On one hand, the cause may be simply geographical location. On the other hand, certain human

factors may have been at work: a combination of causes intellectual (learning) and moral (habituation to a certain character through repeated actions). The legions learned through repeated military experiences “rather to hate the enemy” or “to hate the enemy more.” They learned to hate the enemy more, that is, than their fellow citizens, or rather parties and armies of fellow citizens active in civil strife whose interests and goals conflict with their own. The civic and military norm, of course, is for soldiers to distinguish the enemy against whom they fight from their friends, the fellow citizens whom they defend and who in turn support them. In civil wars, however, this ordering is overturned; not so, or less so, for the troops in Britain. Tacitus’s explicit formulation is *seu . . . seu*, “either...or”; the reader is left to note for himself that “or both” is not excluded—indeed is most likely. External facts such as location are causes; intellectual and moral actions are causes; and the operation of one kind does not exclude the operation of others. Indeed, in the understanding of human actions, we must usually put together both external causes and human causes, together with their interactions.

From Britain to Illyria, eastward across the Adriatic from northern Italy:

There was quiet in Illyria, although the legions summoned by Nero had, while they tarried in Italy, approached Verginius with deputations. But the armies, kept apart by long distances, were not mixing together either with their vices or with their forces—which is most salutary for maintaining soldierly loyalty. (9.3)

As in Britain, so in Illyria, the legions were not active in civil strife. These latter, however, had sent a delegation to Verginius. Tacitus does not elaborate what their intention might have been, but it would surely have been coordination with Verginius, no doubt in relation to his own troops’ seeking to make him emperor. We have already been told that Verginius declined to make that attempt; Tacitus here adds a further explanatory element. The addition of the Illyrian legions to the German legions in support of Verginius might have caused a bid for power on his part to take place; but the geographical separation kept the armies from mixing together sufficiently to bring about their joint action. Whereas Tacitus noted about the German legions that the combination of prideful anger and anxiety is *periculosissimum*, “most dangerous” (8.2), here he notes that the incapacity of armies, thanks to geographical separation, to mix their vices and forces together is *saluberrimum*, “most salutary.” His comments reflect wide-ranging observation and deep thought on the effective management of armies throughout the Roman Empire.

The largest forces of legions not yet surveyed are based in the East, to which he turns next:

The East up to now had not moved. Syria and four legions were controlled by Licinius Mucianus, a man famous alike in favorable and in adverse circumstances. As a young man he ambitiously cultivated distinguished friendships. Soon—his resources worn away, his position slippery, even the anger of Claudius suspected—relegated to a secluded part of Asia, he was as close to an exile as he was later to an emperor. A mixture of extravagant indulgence and diligence, affability and arrogance, evil and good arts. Excessive pleasures, when he was idle; as often as he had set about to act, great virtues. Publicly you would praise; but private things sounded bad. With subordinates, with intimates, with colleagues he was powerful through varied enticements; and for him it was more readily achieved to hand over imperial rule than to obtain it. (10.1–2)

In turning to the as yet quiet legions in Syria, Tacitus gives us the first of many character sketches in the *Histories*, this one devoted to the commander in Syria, Licinius Mucianus. The choice is worthy of note: not a future emperor—Vitellius or Vespasian—but the general who was to be involved as much as Vespasian himself in the decision and in the effort to make Vespasian emperor. Tacitus gives many of his character sketches upon the death of the person in question, as epitaphs, as is the case with Galba, for example (49.2–4). That it is the sketch of Mucianus that is given here is perhaps to be understood above all as a consequence of the fact that this third part of the introduction is concerned with the causes of events: Mucianus is the indispensable initiating cause of the eventual emperorship of Vespasian.

The sketch of Mucianus is dominated by opposites. The course of his life passed through successes and failures. He was close to power, but then slipped and withdrew to seclusion in the province of Asia (in what is now Turkey). Here as often Tacitus uses brief, epigrammatic antitheses: “as close to an exile as later to an emperor” (which we doubtless must understand to mean “as close to being an exile as later to being an emperor”). As Mucianus’s situation in life passed through opposites—favorable and adverse circumstances, friendships and isolation, nearly an exile and nearly an emperor—so too do the traits of his character combine opposites: excessive self-indulgence in idleness and impressive exertion in action, friendly courtesy and haughty arrogance, evil and good arts, private vices and public virtues.

“Evil and good arts” merits some further reflection. Tacitus sometimes uses “good arts” to refer to what we tend to call liberal arts, generally for

Tacitus with a suggestion of their employment for the public good; hence one thinks of the art of rhetoric, knowledge of politics and history, moral philosophy. (Too much philosophy, however, according to the mother of Agricola, can be incompatible with the duties of a senatorial Roman—*Agricola* 4). Tacitus gives us two clues as to what he might mean by “evil arts.” On one hand, reference to Mucianus’s vice of immoderate indulgence in pleasures suggests that “evil arts” might relate to such enjoyments. On the other hand, Mucianus’s capacity to impose his way on subordinates, friends, and colleagues through various allurements or enticements suggests a kind of art of influence that could be used at least as readily for blameworthy as for admirable ends. That Tacitus’s first overall sketch of a figure in his *Histories* gives such strong prominence to the copresence of opposites leads one to surmise that this aspect of human character is of special importance for his understanding of the human heart and soul: rarely, if ever, does one find a character of pure goodness—or, for that matter, of pure evil. Even Otho, contemptible in so many respects, displays a certain nobility and perhaps even concern for the common good in his death (II.47–50).

The sketch of Mucianus ends with an epigrammatic antithesis: *cui expeditius fuerit tradere imperium quam obtinere*, “for whom it was more readily achievable to hand over than to obtain imperial rule.” *Expeditius*, “more readily achievable,” is a comparative adjective related to the verb *expedire*, translated just above as “set about to act,” as opposed to being idle. Action brought out his virtues, idleness his vices. His individual character and circumstances made him more able to act to hand off imperial power to another than to take it for himself. Tacitus also ends his sketch of Galba’s life and character with an antithetical epigram: *omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset*, “by the consensus of all, capable of imperial rule—if he had not ruled” (49.4). Both epigrams provoke reflection on what is necessary if someone is to exercise imperial rule. We are prepared by this analysis of Mucianus’s character and by reflection on exercising imperial rule to appreciate Tacitus’s later judgment, expressed after sketching some characteristic modes of action of Mucianus and of Vespasian: *egregium principatus temperamentum, si demptis utriusque vitiis solae virtutes miscerentur*, “An outstanding temperament of emperorship, if, with the vices of each of them removed, the virtues alone were mixed [together in one *princeps*]” (II.5).

Tacitus next, of course, turns to Judaea and Vespasian:

The Judaeen war was being conducted by Flavius Vespasianus—Nero had chosen him as general—with three legions. Neither Vespasian’s

wish nor his spirit was against Galba. Indeed, he had sent his son Titus to show respect and devotion to him, as we shall record in its place. The hidden things of fate, and that imperial rule was destined by signs and oracular responses for Vespasian and his children—we believed after fortune's outcome. (10.3)

Tacitus lets us know that Vespasian accepted Galba as emperor (the first motion toward making Vespasian emperor would come later, at the urging of the more versatile Mucianus), a fact confirmed by his sending Titus to show respect. The importance of that fact is strongly underlined by Tacitus's announcement that he will narrate it in its place—the first explicit reference forward to a particular future event. The final sentence makes the first specific mention of fate, omens, oracles, which had been referred to (along with reference to punishment by gods) in a very general way in 3.2. Here the tone of Tacitus's account is skeptical or debunking: all these claims about fate, oracles, and signs were believed only after the fortuitous event had actually happened (*post fortunam*, a characteristically compact Tacitean expression, literally "after fortune"). There are many things believed to be omens, signs, prophecies, and so forth; after the event, one can always look back to find some that appear to have pointed to what was actually to happen. Thucydides (in chapter 54 of Book II; see also chapter 8) makes a similar point about oracles that predicted either a famine or a plague in Athens.

Having written about Gaul, Germany, Britain, Illyria, Syria, and Judaea, Tacitus quickly touches on the remaining areas of the empire, beginning with the special case of Egypt, to which he devotes more words than he does to any of the other remaining areas:

Starting already with divine Augustus, Romans of the equestrian order control Egypt and the troops by which it is held, in the place of the kings. It thus seemed expedient to keep the province in house—a province difficult of access, abounding in grain, discordant and unstable with superstition and licentiousness, ignorant of laws, unacquainted with magistracies. At that time Tiberius Alexander, of that same nation, was ruling. (11.1)

The importance of Egypt, founded above all on its production of great quantities of grain needed to supply Rome, led Augustus to keep control of it in the imperial household—governed not by senatorial proconsuls, legates, or regular imperial procurators but by a Roman of equestrian rank reporting back to the emperor alone. Elsewhere (*Annals* II.59.3) Tacitus explains that this special separate status of Egypt was strengthened by the prohibition of any senatorial or top-level equestrian Roman to enter Egypt without the

emperor's express permission. Our historian puts this prohibition *inter alia dominationis arcana*, "among other secrets of mastery," and explains the reason: someone could seize Egypt and its key positions on land and sea, oppress Italy with famine, and hold out against even a much larger army. Needless to say, the "secret of mastery" is not the prohibition itself but the publicly unstated reason for it.

In addition to sketching its geographical and agricultural features, Tacitus asserts some moral and political facts about Egypt that add to the reasons for Augustus and his successors to govern it in a particular manner. The population is divided into discordant segments and is unstable, from the effects of superstition and licentiousness. This remarkably compact formulation suggests a number of moral and political reflections. A people can be harmonized or even unified by one civic religion; by contrast, proneness to superstition produces many different conceptions and practices regarding gods, destiny, omens, and the like, through which different groups of people may come to view each other as deeply misguided, alien, even hostile. A people can be well-ordered toward promoting their common good in cooperation with others through habits of moderation, justice, patriotism; by contrast, licentious practices vary indefinitely and center on each individual's pleasure, which may often or even typically involve zero-sum competition with others rather than cooperation. Politically, Tacitus calls the Egyptians, accustomed time out of mind to being ruled by pharaohs, ignorant of laws and unacquainted with magistracies. This is the first mention of laws in the *Histories*; here *insciam legum*, "ignorant of laws," echoes *inscitia rei publicae*, "ignorance of the republic" (1.1), which according to Tacitus marred histories of Rome under one-man rule. Under despotic rule there is not the stability and sense of security that can come from life under known laws executed by magistrates with defined powers and responsibilities. Thus Tacitus contrasts Egyptian life under despotism with Roman life under laws and legally defined magistrates. But of course, a deep question underlies Tacitus's whole endeavor of writing imperial history: to what extent can laws and defined magistracies exist under one-man rule? What things tend to promote and what tend to undermine laws in such a regime as Rome's under an emperor?

The remaining provinces of the empire are given short shrift:

Africa and the legions in it—Clodius Macer having been killed—were content with an emperor of whatever sort, after their trial of a lesser master. The two Mauretanas, Raetia, Noricum, Thrace, and such other provinces as are held down by procurators—to whatever army

they were neighbors, so, by contact with the more powerful, they were moved to favor or hatred. The unarmed provinces—and first among them Italy itself, available for whatever servitude it might be—would turn into a prize of war. (11.2–11.3.3)

Tacitus had already told his readers of the abortive revolt of Clodius Macer in Africa (7.1); here we learn that that failed attempt had an effect akin to that of a purge: no desire to try something like that again. Provinces with less powerful armies—the two Mauretaniae (coastal land in what is now Morocco and Algeria), Raetia and Noricum (territories south of the Danube), Thrace (north of Greece), and other provinces governed by procurators—followed the partisan lead of stronger neighboring forces. Unarmed provinces, most notably Italy itself, would be subject like a prize of war to whoever marshaled the strongest force. Here Tacitus elaborates a consequence of the crucial fact, formerly secret, that an emperor can be made elsewhere than in Rome, or in other words, by the most powerful legions. The harshest consequence: Italy, unarmed as it is, will be subject to whatever servitude may be its lot. Citizens of the empire have no significant influence on who governs.

Tacitus deploys an interestingly varied set of terms for ruling and being ruled in this introduction to his *Histories*. At one extreme (and the last such term used in this introductory text) is *servitium*, “servitude,” applied to Italy as an unarmed province. The correlative of being ruled as a slave is to be *dominus*, “master.” Tacitus referred to the African legions as having had the experience of a *dominus minor*, “a lesser master”; and he had attributed one source of historical distortion by writers under the Roman empire to *odio adversus dominantes*, “hatred against masters” (1.1). Opposed to such despotic rule is republican liberty under law, mentioned as something unknown in Egypt (11.1) and unknown by some historical writers after Actium (*inscitia rei publicae*, “ignorance of the republic,” 1.1). Roman historians of the affairs of the Roman people (that is, of Rome’s deeds as a republic) wrote *pari eloquentia ac libertate*, “with equal eloquence and liberty” (1.1); senators experienced a brief renewal of liberty but verging on license, with the death of Nero and prior to Galba’s arrival, that is, in the absence of effective imperial rule (4.3).

Between republican liberty under law and pure despotism, but doubtless closer to despotism, lie the modes of rule by which Romans control various territories. Cluvius Rufus *praeerat*, “was in charge,” over Spain (8.1); the verb *praesum*, *praesesse* is a rather general term for being in charge or being preeminent, or even just being present. Licinius Mucians *obtinebat*, “was in control of,” Syria and four legions (10.1); he was also more adept at passing

on imperial rule than at “obtaining,” *obtinere*, it for himself (10.2). *Obtineo*, *obtinere* has a broad range of meanings involving getting and holding office, power, command. Flavius Vespasianus *administrabat*, “was conducting,” a war (10.3); *administro*, *administrare* usually has a milder managerial tone than one might expect to be used to describe military leadership. Roman equestrians *obtinent*, “control,” Egypt, but since this control is in the place of the kings, the particular individual in the position of controlling Egypt, Tiberius Alexander, *regebat*, “was ruling,” from *rego*, *regere*, a general term for ruling but related to the word *rex*, *regis* for “king” (11.1). Egypt is described further as *coerceretur*, “being held,” by Roman forces; here the verb *coerceo*, *coercere* emphasizes the element of compelling force (11.1). Other areas *cohibentur*, “are held down,” by procurators; *cohibeo*, *cohibere* highlights the action of restraining involved in governance (11.2).

An oft-discussed stylistic trait of Tacitus’s writing is *variatio*: variation of terms, constructions, and syntax. In addition to its literary effect, such *variatio* may also be deployed to make an important point about the versatility and flexibility of language in relation to the realities that it seeks to depict, narrate, and analyze. In this case of numerous terms for modes of rule, Tacitus seems to seek also to provoke readers to reflect on all the varieties of leadership, governance, control, and compulsion that human beings may exercise over each other. He certainly gives great weight to the difference between republican and imperial rule, and one could hardly doubt his preference, absolutely, for republican liberty under law to imperial governance centered in one man. But once Rome is governing far-flung provinces, these matters become complicated. Tacitus accepts that republican governance is no longer possible for Rome (1.1: “it was in the interest of peace for all power to be conferred on one man”), and he clearly states (*Annals* I.2) that the provinces found that being governed by one man, an emperor, was more conducive to their well-being than being governed by late republican Rome with its civil discords, greedy magistrates, and the manifold corruptions of judicial proceedings. As Machiavelli noted in his *Discourses* (Book II, chapter 2), a conquered province is usually more harshly governed and exploited by an imperial republic than by a monarch. The brief introductory discussion of Roman rule in many provinces points to questions about what the various modes of such rule are, how they differ in their effects, and how the character of the most suitable rule would vary with the character of the population of the ruled province; quite different modes of Roman governance might be suitable for Gaul and for Egypt.

Tacitus marks the conclusion of his introduction to the *Histories* with an evidently summary statement, which includes the exact repetition of six words from his first sentence, *Servius Galba iterum Titus Vinius consules*, “Servius Galba again Titus Vinius consuls”:

This was the state of Roman affairs when Servius Galba (for the second time) and Titus Vinius, consuls, began the last year for them, nearly the final year for the commonwealth [*rei publicae*]. (11.3.4–6)

The key term here is *res publica*—public thing, republic, public affair, commonwealth—and the key assertion is that Galba’s and Vinius’s consulship, during which they were soon to be killed, came close to being the last year of the *res publica*. To recapitulate: *res publica* can mean the republic, as distinguished from the empire; thus in 1.1 Tacitus attributed to writers’ ignorance of *res public* their less than truthful historical accounts of Roman affairs under the empire. A similar use of the term occurs in Galba’s speech (16.1) where he says that “if the immense body of the empire could stand and be balanced without a director, I would be a worthy one from whom the *res publica* might begin.” But as we noted in discussing 1.1, *res publica* can also mean public business, the state, the common good, or in an apt phrase used by Hobbes, the commonwealth. It is in this sense that Tacitus uses the term here in 11.3: the Roman commonwealth (now ordered in the form of an empire) nearly perished in this dreadful year of civil war. In an absolute sense, the common good may be better promoted by a *res publica* in the sense of a republican form of government; but when that form proved to be inadequate to meet the needs of an expanded Rome, rule by one emperor became necessary and hence what most promotes *res publica*, public well-being, in those circumstances. The goal of Tacitus’s historical inquiry is to promote *res publica*, the Roman commonwealth, to the extent that that is possible in the circumstances. This inquiry involves seeking whether, and how, some kind of liberty can be combined with empire and what could be the character of such liberty; what understandings and institutional arrangements might conduce more than others to the emergence into imperial power of better rather than worse men. His inquiry also necessarily includes the endeavor to understand how a man can lead a decent life, and perhaps achieve a level of greatness, even under a bad emperor (*Agricola* 42). Tacitus’s clear, not to say harsh, realism assures us that while he fully appreciates the value of knowing the true historical account of political events, he does not exaggerate the good effects that even the best truthful historical narrative and analysis might bring about.

