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 Dylan Sailor
 Excerpt
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Introduction: a life, in fragments

In a 1995 article Géza Alföldy made a strong case that a fragmentary inscription (*CIL* VI 1574) probably belonged to the funerary monument of P. Cornelius Tacitus.¹ While it adds little to our knowledge of his biography, this scrap of writing from what seems to have been an imposing monument is a good way to adjust our perspective on his literary monument.² Everything we are accustomed to think about Tacitus is filtered through the prism of his writing: much of our information about his biography comes from his books, and our first instinct is to use that information as a means of shedding light on those books. So, for instance, knowing that he was a senator and consul matters because it justifies our confidence in his grasp, and therefore treatment, of politics; knowing that he was a star advocate illuminates his linguistic virtuosity; knowing his place of origin might explain the orientation and interests of his narrative; knowing when he died would tell us whether we can read parts of his last work, *Annals*, as bearing on the principate of Hadrian. Few would value this information for its own sake; we want it because it helps us interpret what he wrote. But this inscription would not have aimed to explain *Annals* or *Histories*, nor is there any reason to think it would have referred to them at all.³ It is the inscription that any elite man would have had placed on his monument; what for us makes him singular would not there have rated as worthy of mention. The life of P. Cornelius Tacitus could be communicated to Rome's population

¹ Alföldy (1995b). Birley (2000) offers further considerations. Damon (2003: 2n1) is agnostic on the identification. On Tacitus' *praenomen*, see Goodyear (1972–81: 1.85); "Gaius" is our other option.

² We can now add service as a *decemvir stlitibus iudicandis*, as *quaestor Augusti*, and probably as *tribunus militum*, to his résumé. For perspectives on the discovery's importance, see Birley (2000: 236–8) and Giua (2003: 261–2). The original inscription will have stretched about 4 m across, and perhaps 90 cm high (Alföldy 1995b: 262). According to Alföldy (263), this would make it one of the largest preserved funerary inscriptions for a senator.

³ In the late Republic and early Principate, elite grave *tituli* are interested in the *cursus honorum* to the exclusion of all else: see Eck (1999a) and (2005). Beard (1998) challenges our habit of reading them as altogether formulaic, but this is an uphill task when it comes to senatorial and equestrian *cursus* inscriptions, which seem to me to be governed by a rigid sense of propriety.

satisfactorily without reference to the sole reason why scholars take more than a passing interest in him.

This does not, of course, mean that we have all been misguided in our interest in Tacitus' books, nor, I hope, that we should stop writing about them. But it does remind us that his books were only part of a life made up of countless interactions with other people: appearances at the bar, epistolary exchanges with associates, literary recitations exciting or tedious, eulogies delivered, rituals performed, circus games attended, funerals planned. Interwoven with his other social acts was his publication of several short works and two long works of narrative history. Time has ensured that these are the social acts we can still access directly; the rest are simply gone.⁴

This book is the result of an attempt to take seriously the reminder this inscription offers, that Tacitus' writing was part of a life. More specifically, it explores ways in which his historiographical work interacts with, interprets, and manages the relations between his political biography, his literary career, and his social self. I focus on the self-reflexive aspects of his work, areas in which explicit or implicit questions arise about what it means to represent the past, what it means to do so under specific social and political conditions, and what it means in particular for Tacitus to do so. The scope and interests of my inquiry are defined by a set of interrelated questions: what sort of self does Tacitus' authorial voice project? How does his work position his various readerships toward his individual works, and toward his career? How does he situate his work within the history of historiography, within the history of representation, within Roman political history? From the vantage point of his work, what is the relationship between writing and the broader society? What sort of claims does his work make for its own potential to affect the world? How does his political biography affect how he represents his literary activity, and likewise how does his literary career dispose us to think about him?

In chapter 1, I set out some essential concepts for understanding the interaction of historiographical career and social self within the peculiar political and cultural circumstances of the Principate. The advent of monarchy had far-reaching consequences for the ways in which elites related to each other, to the larger population of Romans, to the state, and to the empire; these consequences extended to the production of literature, historiography included. In this chapter I sketch out elite anxieties about personal

⁴ We do have *traces* of other acts – in Pliny's letters, in a couple of inscriptions, in the names of the offices he held – but not the acts themselves.

autonomy and about the availability of prestige in the shadow of the *princeps*, and I examine Tacitus' interest in various modes of life that could be used to demonstrate autonomy; I propose that we can look at his authorial career as one such mode, with unique advantages. In this regard, I also devote substantial attention to the implications for historiography of the power and authority of the *princeps*. His position within society tended to generate, and to elicit from others, accounts of the past and of the present that aligned with its own interests – in crude but useful terms, the regime both put forward narratives that it wished to be believed and, because of its power to reward or to harm, caused others to generate accounts that they hoped would meet with the regime's approval. In this way, an important literary effect of the monarchy was a crisis of authorship. A writer merely putting into words the regime's account was in important respects a copyist not an author, so it was vital that an author be able to show that his work was authentic, the creation of an autonomous social agent; yet so obvious were the incentives to ventriloquize the regime, and so strong the presumed pressures, that it was hard to persuade a readership that your work was your own. One notable feature of Tacitus' presentation of his own work and career is an ongoing struggle with this burden of authenticity, a burden made all the heavier because of his political success under a string of *principes*.

Chapters 2 through 5 then continue the inquiry across Tacitus' historiographical *œuvre*, through two complementary kinds of discussion. One kind focuses on his programmatic disposition of his work: so, in chapters 2 and 3, I begin from the prefaces of *Agricola* and *Histories*, in which he talks explicitly about his own work and prepares us to read it. In these intricately crafted pieces of rhetoric he strives for command over the implications of his work. I trace out how they negotiate the interests and stakes of multiple audiences, and how they situate the individual work within his literary career, within his biography, and within literary and political history, and I pay close attention to how these sections structure the reader's experience, create a compact between reader and author, and attempt to outfit the reader with the author's preferred hermeneutic.

The other kind of discussion, represented in chapters 2 and 4, focuses instead on particular parts of Tacitus' narrative work and explores points at which his writing implicitly comes into competition with forms of representation dominated by the regime. So, in chapter 2, I look at his depiction in *Agricola* of the relationship elite men have to imperial conquest and administration, while in chapter 4 I discuss his portrayal in *Histories* of the city of Rome and its relation to the empire. Both the representation of

military success (in the form of distribution of honors, of ritual occasions such as the triumph, of public visual depictions of conquest) and the city of Rome as a space of commemoration and communication had been, since an early point in the principate of Augustus, the private preserve of the regime.⁵ Tacitus' books do not only undertake, as it were, to work in the same media as the regime, but also present themselves as antithetical to the kind of representations the regime tends to generate. Some scholars have highlighted points at which he is eager to challenge the regime's version of particular events.⁶ Yet at times he pursues an even more ambitious agenda: his writing appears not merely to challenge individual points the regime has got wrong but actually to compete with several of the regime's characteristic modes of representation. So, for example, his treatment of Agricola's life corrects Domitian's portrayal of Agricola's imperial successes but also corrects the ways in which *principes* tended, for institutional reasons, to recognize the military attainments of elite men. Likewise, his depiction of the city in *Histories* reacts to the way it was treated by the competing *principes* of 69 CE, but it also suggests that this sort of treatment, too, is characteristic of what the Principate does to the city, and offers itself as a sort of alternative to that abuse. This competition is not a simple matter of political opposition, though it can be read that way; it also makes an argument about the nature of Tacitus' authorial career and so about Tacitus himself: he produces written accounts of the past that compete with (and are then, *a fortiori*, independent of) the regime's power to produce and enforce its own representations.

For good reason, in chapters 2 and 4 my discussion of Tacitus' representational work is concerned especially with representation of imperial conquest. The endurance of the empire, and of Romans' self-image as rulers of an empire, was sometimes construed as the benefit they had acquired in exchange for the sacrifice of internal political liberty, and traditionally the empire was the chief avenue to personal distinction, though the Principate had made that source problematic, to say the least.⁷ Yet the empire, and representation of it, remained at the heart of questions of individual distinction and corporate identity for the elite, and Tacitus' ability to intervene in the system of representation of military success inevitably affects a reader's estimate of the value and importance of his work.

Although there is a real and useful difference between the "programmatic" and "representational" kinds of discussion I engage in, the questions

⁵ Eck (1984). ⁶ See, for example, Damon (1999) and Eck (2002a).

⁷ "Sacrifice": cf. Luc. 1.670, *cum domino pax ista venit*.

they involve are closely linked. For Tacitus' programmatic material exists, in part, in order to explain the implications of his narrative, and that narrative in turn frequently seems to have programmatic repercussions – that is, it is sometimes written in such a way as to foreground the question *what it means* to present that narrative material in the way that Tacitus does. For that reason, chapter 5 is an appropriate consummation of the preceding chapters, in that it deals with a moment in *Annals* that is at once programmatic and representational: that complex of thoughts on historiography and commemoration built around the trial of Cremutius Cordus in Book Four of *Annals*. This section of *Annals* clearly has implications, even if unspecified, for Tacitus' own writing, but it is also about the regime's investment in a particular version of the past and of the present. In this section of *Annals*, indeed, writing and politics merge, as representation becomes a means of political action, and political power is shown to be above all a matter of enforcement of representation; the story about Cremutius becomes a story about Tacitus; and the work's staged victory over the regime's representations then becomes an arrogation of sovereignty to Tacitus' writing and to himself.

After the groundwork in chapter 1, which draws on Tacitus' whole historiographical *œuvre* but especially on *Annals*, the sequence of chapters is mainly chronological: *Agricola* is our object of inquiry in chapter 2; chapters 3 and 4 are about *Histories*; and chapter 5 deals principally with *Annals*. My aim in this was to preserve the sense of career trajectory the books evoke: *Agricola* and *Histories* in particular are concerned with what has gone before, and with what is to come next. Though *Germania* and *Dialogus* are Tacitus', and fascinating, they will not appear here as primary objects of attention, because they do not form part of that arc of narrative works that imagine themselves as a sequence: *Agricola* by its promise of a future narrative treatment of the Flavians and of the blessed era of Nerva and Trajan; *Histories* by its partial fulfillment of that promise, by its evocation of the preface of *Agricola*, and by its promise (again) of a narrative treatment of the present fortunate age; *Annals* by its inevitable trend toward the beginning of *Histories*.⁸

Before we come to grips with the dynamics of Tacitus' *œuvre* as a career, it will be worthwhile to reflect, in the first chapter, on what a career in historiography had to offer, and how the writing of history fits into the larger social, cultural, and political developments of the Principate.

⁸ There is a way of looking at *Dialogus* as a point retroactively inserted into this trajectory, if we take its discussion of oratory and poetry as a seminal moment in the future historiographical career of the young Tacitus, who is present but silent during the conversation.

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CHAPTER I

*Autonomy, authority, and representing the past
 under the Principate*

THE HISTORIAN'S VOICE

ἐπιεικῶς γὰρ ἅπαντες νομίζουσιν εἰκόνας εἶναι τῆς ἐκάστου ψυχῆς τοὺς λόγους.

It is a universal and correct opinion that a man's words are the images of his very soul. (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.1.3)

The writer and the man are not always the same person. (Sir Ronald Syme [1970: 10])

I start with a paradox. That funerary inscription with which we began advertises Tacitus' political distinctions. To judge by what he wrote, however, it might seem shocking that he had a political career at all. He acknowledges that facet of his life in prominent places, and we would know less about him if he did not (*Hist.* 1.1.3, *Ann.* 11.11.1). Yet his works dwell on the corrupting and contaminating effects of the Principate on Roman society and often seem to suggest that political life under the Principate is only an empty, poisonous charade. How, you want to ask, could that same historian who saw with such clarity, and condemned with such trenchancy, the hypocrisy and vanity of the Principate also want to take part in it?¹ In other words, should he not rather have shaken the dust from his feet and gone into retirement, done anything rather than live the deplorable lie?

Our concern here is of course naive, in that it confuses the "Tacitus" narrating these works with the historical person P. Cornelius Tacitus. Although it is hard not to ascribe the dispositions with which the narrator is endowed to the convictions of that person, the inscription reminds us that there need be no such straightforward relationship. The works might bear the impress of Tacitus' soul. But, of course, they might not. This observation

¹ See the discussion of Martin (1994: 38).

is not purely academic but actually matters for how we read. For, if we are accordingly agnostic on the matter, we are free to decouple from the historical Tacitus the thoughts and feelings of that authorial self his writings project.² No longer bound to square that person with the one whose life is partly retailed in *CIL* VI 1574, we can treat it as what it is – a literary effect – and entertain other explanations for it.

Having just insisted on the value of distinguishing between narrative voice and historical author, I need to add an important caveat. While Romans were quite able to grasp this distinction in some genres of literature, it is not clear that history was one of these, or that readers of history were ready, or typically asked, to distinguish the voice that narrates the text from the voice of the person who produced it.³ From what we know of the reception of historiography, Roman readers would have been exhibiting naivety about the rules of the genre if they imagined “Tacitus” as something largely insulated from Tacitus. Identity of the two may be no less a fiction than total difference, but it was a fiction that Tacitus’ readers will have accepted as a matter of course as the terms of their reading.

So, if the narrator of Tacitus’ works is a construct, it is nonetheless a construct that might have very real repercussions for the person responsible for writing them. A history was self-evidently in the thick of things – or at least was self-evidently *trying* to be in the thick of things – to a degree unequalled by any other kind of Roman literature, and its author therefore seemed to be so as well. Even if there were exceptions, that genre was felt to be the province of the political elite.⁴ In justifying his historiographical activity, a historian often used in his favor his own political experience, which established his right to speak knowledgeably about the events he was reporting.⁵ Writing history was then a lot like politics, in that the practitioners of each were, at least in theory, to be drawn from the same

² With characteristic sensitivity, Syme recognizes the separability of “writer” and “man” (see, e.g., 1970: 131, “Perhaps in himself a complicated character, perhaps not. Who can say?”) and aptly compares straightforward biographical explanation of Tacitus’ work to similar, but more obviously misguided, interpretation of Juvenal (131n1). But in the same piece (136) he remains persuaded that the historian’s “outbursts” are good clues to his personal opinions.

³ If nothing else, Catullus 16 shows that it was in a reader’s interpretive toolkit; in fact, certain Roman genres do not make much sense unless we allow that readers were ready to accept that the voice speaking at any given time need not be narrowly identified with the writer (the novel and satire leap to mind). See also, for example, Mart. 1.4.8, *lasciva est nobis pagina, vita proba*; other examples in Howell (1980 ad loc.). See, however, the reservations of Wiseman (1992: 60–1).

⁴ Syme (1970: 2): “[history] remained for a long time the monopoly of the governing order; and it kept the firm imprint of its origins ever after. The senator came to his task in mature years, with a proper knowledge of men and government, a sharp and merciless insight. Taking up the pen, he fought again the old battles of Forum and Curia.”

⁵ Marincola (1997: 133–48).

pool.⁶ The subject matter of Roman history, too, was like politics: the elite concerned itself in political practice with policy, that is, with what was to be done by Romans in the future (*res gerendae*, “policy”), while historians occupied themselves with presenting a narrative of the results of policy, that is, with what Romans had done in the past (*res gestae*, “history”).⁷ The political orator had a command of history; writing history was, so far as Cicero was concerned, a job for an orator (*de Orat.* 1.201).⁸ On one view, then, in writing history a senator was engaged in an activity something like delivering policy speeches – something like, that is, participating in politics. If in a history “Tacitus” appeared to think the Principate was noxious and barren, then a Roman reader would not seem mad if he or she thought this was also the political stance of Tacitus himself.⁹

So, then, although I think we should abandon all pretense of knowing Tacitus, and treat the “Tacitus” of the Tacitean corpus as, in the first instance, a textual effect, nonetheless, because this textual effect once had repercussions for the historical Tacitus, we can talk usefully about how his books represent him before his readership. Prestige attached to the skillful execution of literary monuments such as *Histories* and *Annals*: in this sense, his literary career stood to be advanced or hindered with every word he wrote (and the impression that deep, even obsessive care has gone into his works, from the smallest scale to the largest, seems to mean that *something* important is afoot at every step).¹⁰ We can attribute to historians all sorts of motivations for writing – to air their views, to distribute praise and blame, to edify posterity, to reward or punish past heroes and

⁶ It is unclear how many historians before Livy had been non-senatorial: Valerius Antias and Claudius Quadrigarius are usually excluded from the *curia*, but this cannot be proved: see Cornell (1986: 78–9).

⁷ Cf. the formulation at Sal. *Cat.* 3.1–2 (note there the flurry of “doing” vs. “writing what has been done” antitheses). The sentences appear in the context of a larger argument that making and writing history are two paths to the same goal: a good reputation (2.9).

⁸ Pliny (*Ep.* 5.8) worries aloud that, if he revises his speeches and writes a history at the same time, he will confuse the styles appropriate to each sort of writing. The consensus view to which he reacts, however, seems to be that writing history is quite similar to writing oratory (cf. §7, §9), and Pliny of course has every reason to emphasize the difficulties of writing history, both as an excuse for not doing it and as a way of amplifying his achievement if he does. For ancient historiography as a species of rhetoric, see Woodman (1988).

⁹ See, e.g., *Dial.* 3.3, where Secundus has asked Maternus whether he is removing politically offensive material from his tragedy *Cato*, which he had recited the previous day. Maternus’ answer: *Tum ille: “leges tu quid Maternus sibi debuerit, et agnosces quae audisti. quod si qua omisit Cato, sequenti recitatione Thyestes dicet . . .”* Maternus’ third-person use of his own name here suggests his own interchangeability with Cato and Thyestes.

¹⁰ Tacitus himself refers to *Annals* as *cura nostra* at *Ann.* 4.11.3 (see *Ann.* 3.24.3). For historians’ emphasis on the *labor* involved in their work, see Marincola (1997: 148–58). On the enhanced potential for literary glory beginning in the late Republic, see Wiseman (1987a: 91) regarding Livy’s glory.

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criminals – but the point was always also to make a name for themselves. For, as we are often reminded, historiography was a subsection of Roman literary endeavor, which in a meaningful way was itself a subsection of a whole realm of performance and monumentalization aimed at winning prestige for social agents. From this perspective, a history stands on a continuum with lyric poetry and encyclopedias, with tombs and public architecture, with priestly duties and triumphal processions, with cultivated dress and comportment. The function of a history is to be a writer’s public *monumentum* both present and posthumous, to attract good repute and weight to his name – in short, to be a “big deal” and to make him a “big deal” as well.¹¹

There is one sense in which the prestige of writing is just about being famous, about being widely known as the author of a book. This is what Martial is talking about in the poem that opens his first book of epigrams: “Here’s the guy! The one you’re reading is the one you’re looking for: Martial, known all over the world for his snappy books of epigrams” (*Hic est quem legis ille, quem requiris, | toto notus in orbe Martialis | argutis epigrammaton libellis*, Mart. 1.1.1–3). It is also the kind of fame that Livy enjoys in the familiar anecdote Pliny shares:

Numquamne legisti, Gaditanum quendam Titi Livi nomine gloriaque commotum ad visendum eum ab ultimo terrarum orbe venisse, statimque ut viderat abisse? (*Ep.* 2.3.8)

Haven’t you ever read how a fellow from Gades was moved by the name and glory of Titus Livius to come from the ends of the earth to get a look at him and, as soon as he had laid eyes on him, left straightaway?

But there is another sense in which a historiographical career, in particular Tacitus’ career, could affect his repute. If we accept the proposition that Roman readers would have read his work as a reflection of him, then we can also legitimately see his writing as a medium for managing his reputation not just as an author but also more generally as a social agent. As I will discuss in further detail below, the political conditions of monarchy created a scenario in which displays of personal autonomy, of independence from the *princeps*, garnered a good deal of attention and could enhance a person’s stature considerably. Works that appeared, by whatever means, to confirm the autonomy of their author might, then, seem to offer an avenue to a kind of prestige rather different from generic literary renown. As we

¹¹ On this, Marincola (1997: 57–62) is excellent. On the idea of becoming famous by writing history, cf. Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.6 and Plin. *Ep.* 5.8.1.

will see in a variety of ways throughout this book, we can regard Tacitus' historiographical *œuvre* as trying to follow precisely that path, and to act as a monument to his personal autonomy.

It was equipped to serve that purpose in several ways. To begin with, we might regard that familiar package of distinctive characteristics of the Tacitean persona – the alienation, the irony, the severity, the unflagging disapproval – as a possible, if not inevitable, response to the peculiar value that elite society under the Principate assigned to displays of autonomy and authenticity. But beyond that, I would argue that we can view in a similar light two of the features of his historical writing that occupy us most in later chapters of this book: the ways in which he situates his work historically and socially in relationship to the Principate and to particular *principes*, and those in which his work appears to contrast with the representational habits and strategies characteristic of *principes*.

In the two main sections of this chapter I investigate two topics central to the relationship between historiography and personal distinction within the culture of the early Principate. The first section centers on the question of elite autonomy: here we see that in this era elite Roman society placed a substantial premium on demonstrating that you did not live in subjection, and that a historiographical career offered a way of making such a demonstration. In the second section we turn to the issue of authority and authorship. Here I explore some of the ways in which the nature of public discourse under the Principate posed challenges to demonstrating personal autonomy via a literary career.

AUTONOMY AND ELITE PRESTIGE

Elite discourse under the Principate was obsessed with the interrelated questions of autonomy and access to public distinction.¹² In the first place, there was a basic anxiety about the real status of any citizen, directly related to anxieties about the real status of the *princeps*. To the extent that a *princeps* was merely what that word implied, that is, the “first citizen,” elite men could be imagined still to operate by their own lights and to be citizens, not subjects. But to the extent that a *princeps* was instead the master presiding over a state and an empire that were *de facto* his domestic property, and the inhabitants of which were thus his slaves, elite men were no more in command of their own persons and actions than were slaves. This “servitude”

¹² The crisis of elite identity in the early Principate has been widely discussed; some recent, important discussions are Hopkins and Burton (1983), Eck (1984), Vielberg (1996: 9–40), Habinek (2000), and Roller (2001).