Introduction:
irony, history, reading

> The ironist aspires to be somebody who gets in on some redescription,
> who manages to change some parts of the vocabularies being used. The
> ironist wants to be a strong poet.
>
> <div align="right">Michael Roth, The Ironist's Cage</div>

SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Tacitus is a notoriously difficult writer; the central theme of this study is what the difficulty of Tacitus means and what are the possible ways a reader can respond to this difficulty. Examining what a difficulty *means* is a rather different action to examining what a difficulty *is*: in the latter case, we identify difficulty, overcome and disregard it; in the former case we bring it with us, as it were, entering into an ongoing relationship with difficulty. I will argue in this study that what is difficult and obscure in Tacitus' style of writing, what seems to call out for clarification, is central to Tacitus' modality of historical and political thought. In other words, Tacitus conveys to his readers his conception of imperial politics by enmeshing them in ambiguous and complicated Latin sentences. If we decode these sentences and translate Tacitus into clear prose, therefore, we lose the historical representation and analysis of which Tacitus' writing is the vehicle. To overcome the difficulty of Tacitus is ultimately to disregard him; instead we must bring Tacitus' difficult style along with us and examine how that style informs not only what we read but *how* we read.

This argument depends upon an association between Tacitus' subject (Roman history at the time of the Julio-Claudian emperors) and Tacitus' writing. In other words, it assumes that when we read Tacitus' *Annals* we do so not exclusively either to find out about first-century Rome or to examine Tacitean style, but for a combination of both purposes, however

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much we may emphasise one over the other as the object of our study. If we conceive of the two as fully separable we will discard either Tacitean style (in favour of a more realistic narrative of the past) or Tacitean politics (in favour of a more formalist analysis of the text's structure). If, as I hope to do here, we conceive of the two as not entirely separable, we can approach a position where the formal structures of Tacitus' prose embody a political judgement of the principate. Tacitean style can be seen as the manifestation in narrative of a particular historical understanding, one which is integrally linked to a senatorial view of the principate. Sir Ronald Syme, in an article entitled 'The senator as historian', stressed the extent to which historiography, in this tradition, embodied the perspectives of the ruling class.

> In the beginning, history was written by senators (first a Fabius, and Cato was the first to use the Latin language); it 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. Exacerbated by failure or not mollified by worldly success, he asserted a personal claim to glory and survival; and, if he wrote in retirement from affairs, it was not always with tranquillity of mind.[1]

The senator's history is informed by his 'proper knowledge', knowledge acquired through practice in government. Syme goes on to inscribe Tacitus in this tradition, yet Tacitus wrote under the principate, at a time when the senate continued to act out its function while watching the encroachment of the imperial household onto its executive power. The position of the senatorial historian in relation to the history of the principate is inevitably sceptical, not only about the new mode of administration but also about the place of the senator in this new political world.

Syme, in the passage quoted above, writes a history of historiography, situating Tacitus' writing in a tradition which starts with Fabius and Cato. Another version of literary history (constructed by Syme elsewhere, as we shall see) places Tacitus' historical perspective and the style which embodies it into a tradition of sceptical historiography which stretches back to Thucydides in the fifth century BC. If we detach the notion of the sceptical historian from any specific historical period (such

[1] Syme (1970) 1–2.

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as fifth-century Athens or Imperial Rome) we can sketch in generally universal terms what denotes the sceptical historian: one who expresses suspicion at evident causes or pretexts, preferring instead to represent himself as scrutinising the appearance of things (presumed to be false) in order to penetrate to the less evident or hidden causes (presumed to be true). Most importantly, the sceptical historian presents his reader with *both* false appearance *and* hidden truth, as well as the scrutiny which led him to characterise things in such a manner. For such a historian language becomes important both as the means and the object of enquiry. False appearances for the most part are held in place by lying words and euphemisms; the historian in turn uses his own language to suggest where words are used as a veil to obscure the truth and where words directly and transparently represent the truth. For a sceptical historian such as Tacitus, however, false appearances are just as important as, if not more important than, hidden truth. To represent a political regime as one sustained on façade and deception is to make a significant judgement about it, and an understanding of that regime will in part be founded on the logic and structure of the façade.

In other words, scepticism towards, say, Augustus' claim to have restored the republic would be articulated by suggesting that 'restoration of the republic' is a euphemism masking the hidden truth, which could be 'establishment of a principate' or 'restitution of monarchy'. But although 'restoration of the republic' is thereby characterised as a false appearance, its role as a powerful ideological claim is not diminished; the phrase evokes the complexity of Augustus' hold not only on contemporary power but also on history. It offers a historian and her readers a way of understanding the Augustan regime which does not depend upon the truth value of the phrase 'restoration of the republic'.

Central to sceptical history, therefore, and central to Tacitus is the practice of analysing events by representing an appearance as false and unearthing something claimed to be truth, which is sometimes at odds with the appearance. Most importantly, however, the sceptical historian does not replace falsehood with truth, thereby erasing the façade, but rather sets the two in conjunction. Nor is the truth necessarily the dominant feature of the historian's thought, as I have argued above. Historical understanding in Tacitus' writing, therefore, resides in the continual interplay of these sometimes incompatible features, false appearance and hidden truth.

This modality of historical understanding is expressed in Tacitus'

distinctive sentence structure; three elements in particular contribute to this expression. The first is the relationship and respective weight of main clauses and subordinate clauses. The Tacitean sentence notoriously displaces emphasis from the main clause onto subordinate clauses, which carry the weight of the sentence's meaning but remain syntactically dependent, not self-sufficient. Ronald Martin introduced the issue in this way.

> (Tacitus) makes use, far more than any other Latin writer, of sentences in which the main clause is completed early and the centre of gravity is displaced to appended, syntactically subordinate, elements. But the restructuring of the sentence is not simply a mannered anti-classical reaction; rather it reflects a different attitude towards history.[2]

As an example of this, we can consider a sentence from early in book 2 of the *Annals*, where Tiberius' reaction to disturbances in Parthia and Armenia is presented, along with an interpretation of this reaction.

> But it did not seem unpleasing to Tiberius that the East was in turmoil, since on this pretext he could remove Germanicus from his customary legions and put him in the way of deceit and disaster when he was placed in charge of new provinces.

> *ceterum Tiberio haud ingratum accidit turbari res Orientis, ut ea specie Germanicum suetis legionibus abstraheret novisque provinciis impositum dolo simul et casibus obiectaret.* (2.5.1)

Although the main clause, occupying a strong position, opens the chapter, the subordinate clause governed by *ut* first makes Tiberius' reaction understandable to the reader, and also forms the crucial transition from the Eastern provinces to the German campaigns, the subject of the ensuing narrative. The subordinate clause, therefore, is the predominant feature of both narrative and historical explanation. As well as explaining Tiberius' reaction, the subordinate clause sets up the Eastern mission as a 'pretext' for the subversion of Germanicus; the telling word *species*, by implying that Tiberius' provincial policy is a cloak for a deeper purpose, enhances the explanatory authority of the subordinate clause.

At other times the Tacitean sentence is structured in the following ways: external evidence is the matter of the main clause, while interpretation, usually of hidden causes, makes up the subordinate clauses; or a fact is stated in the main clause while two subordinate clauses, compris-

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[2] Martin (1981) 221.

ing the false apparent cause and the true hidden cause, are placed in apposition to each other. The hidden truth uncovered by the historian, therefore, depends upon the false appearance, which as the main clause or a balancing subordinate clause supports grammatically what it is claimed to obscure politically. This syntactical interdependence is not meaning-less, but rather reflects the necessity for keeping falsehood and truth in interplay for historical understanding.

An example of this is the striking conclusion to book 1, to which I will return in a number of the following chapters. The generalised statement about freedom with which Tacitus ends this book seems to be provoked by the ambiguity of Tiberius' comments about the candidates for the consulship.

> Often he said that he had only passed on to the consuls the names of those who had proposed themselves as candidates; but others could propose themselves, if they had confidence in their influence or merit: plausible in words, in matter empty or deceitful, and the more they were cloaked in the mask of liberty, the more they were bound to break out in more dangerous servitude.

> *plerumque eos tantum apud se professos disseruit, quorum nomina consulibus edidisset; posse et alios profiteri, si gratiae aut meritis confiderent: speciosa verbis, re inania aut subdola, quantoque maiore libertatis imagine tegebantur, tanto eruptura ad infensius servitium.* (1.81.3)

The interpretation of Tiberius' speech is structured around the contrast between appearance (words) and reality (matter), highlighted, as F. R. D. Goodyear remarked, by the chiastic arrangement of the contrasting terms.[3] But the stark contrast between appearance and reality here is glossed by a comparative construction which creates syntactical interde-pendence between the two. The correlation of false appearances to out-breaks of truth conveyed by the structure *quanto . . . tanto* suggests that truth can only be understood in relation to its indicator, falsehood. This suggestion once more strengthens the status of falsehood in the process of historical understanding.

The second element of the Tacitean sentence, associated with the first, is the shift from one kind of syntactical construction to another between clauses which in classical Latin would appear under the same construc-tion. Friedrich Klingner summed up the effect as follows:

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[3] Goodyear (1981) 186.

> A syntactical system is scarcely indicated before it is already overtaken
> by a second, and so on. At no point in the course of the sentence is one
> able to anticipate the overall direction in thought or form.[4]

This syntactical diversification (*variatio*), as Klingner has observed, not
only creates a lively style, but also makes a requirement of the reader to
read closely. It suggests that clauses, like appearances, are not equally bal-
anced in experienced reality. Most importantly, when false appearance
and hidden truth are presented in this way, the imbalance between
clauses actively discourages simple replacement of falsehood with truth.
In other words, the Tacitean sentence represents truth and falsehood in
language which is not transferable between clauses.

A rather oblique instance of this could be seen to be the opening of
the account of Tiberius' withdrawal from Rome in book 4. The narra-
tive of this occurrence diverges almost immediately into a consideration
of several, not mutually exclusive, reasons for the emperor's self-exile. But
the opening sentence presents the occurrence itself in terms of appear-
ance and reality.

> Meanwhile after having long considered and often deferred his plan
> Caesar finally travelled into Campania, on the pretext of dedicating
> temples, one to Jove at Capua, another to Augustus at Nola, but deter-
> mined to live far away from the city.

> *inter quae diu meditato prolatoque saepius consilio tandem Caesar in*
> *Campaniam, specie dedicandi templa apud Capuam Iovi, apud Nolam*
> *Augusto, sed certus procul urbe degere.* (4.57.1)

As with the previous example from book 2, the term 'pretext' (*species*)
implies some deeper purpose which the opening ablative absolute clause
has also hinted at in referring to a 'long considered plan'. The reality
which this pretext masks is represented in the emphatic participle phrase
at the end of the sentence. Although this conclusion 'reveals' Tiberius'
determination masked by the pretext, the switch from ablative noun
(*specie*) to nominative participle (*certus*) creates a disjunction between the
two clauses. The adverbial *specie*, denoting the manner or means of
Tiberius' movements, is not straightforwardly balanced by the adjectival
certus, which qualifies Tiberius by indicating his state of mind. Indeed,
the opening of the participle phrase with *sed certus* momentarily suggests
that certain knowledge about Tiberius' real intentions is about to be

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[4] Klingner (1955) 193.

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revealed.[5] Hence the term *certus* intensifies the sense that the final phrase is revealing the truth, while at the same time that sense is undermined by awareness that it depends upon a partial misreading of the words.

The final element of sentence structure is asyndeton, the juxtaposition of clauses without explicit conjunctions. Here the effect is not so much of imbalance or variety as of vivid concentration. The relationship between clauses, rather than being unexpected, remains to be determined. Again the reader is required to look closely, and to interpret the sentence in part by assigning a relationship from clause to clause. Syme, referring to this asyndetic practice, expressed confidence in the process of interpretation.

> The omission of words and connectives goes to ruthless extremes for the sake of speed, concentration, and antithesis; and stages in a sequence of thought or action are suppressed, baffling translation (but not hard to understand).[6]

When Syme separates 'translation' and 'understanding' in this way he glosses over the difficulty of assigning unspoken conjunctions to a Tacitean sentence, and thereby he replicates the dilemma in which readers find themselves, faced both with the difficult text and with the expectations of the community of readers. We can consider this in relation to perhaps the most infamous example of Tacitean compression: the opening paragraph of the *Annals*, which sketches the history of power at Rome in a succession of brief sentences. In the absence of conjunctions which would make explicit the interpretation of this history, the reader's attention is directed instead to the densely packed terms of power and power-holders in the passage, and is required to invent a progression between them.

> The city of Rome from the beginning was ruled by kings; Lucius Brutus established freedom and the consulship. Dictatorships were taken up when the time required it; neither was decemviral power valid beyond two years, nor did the consular jurisdiction of military tribunes last long. The despotisms of Cinna and Sulla were not of long duration; and the strength of Pompey and Crassus quickly passed to Caesar, as did the armed force of Lepidus and Antony to Augustus, who accepted everything, worn out with civil discord, under his command in the name of princeps.

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[5] *TLL certus* III A/B.　　[6] Syme (1958) 347.

> *urbem Romam a principio reges habuere; libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit. dictaturae ad tempus sumebantur; neque decemviralis potestas ultra biennium, neque tribunorum militum consulare ius diu valuit. non Cinnae, non Sullae longa dominatio; et Pompei Crassique potentia cito in Caesarem, Lepidi atque Antonii arma in Augustum cessere, qui cuncta discordiis civilibus fessa nomine principis sub imperium accepit.* (1.1.1)

   The concluding relative clause about Augustus serves to slow down the narrative as the turbulence of the old Republic gives way to the stability of the new status quo. This is in contrast to the opening sentences, a series of independent main clauses, each describing a different aspect of power at Rome. The extreme variety of words for power (*potestas*, *ius*, *dominatio*, *potentia*, *arma*, *imperium*) suggests at first that this constitutes a precise description of different aspects of rule, or a studied avoidance of synonyms.[7] But the extreme disjunction between the independent clauses can be provoking to the reader of history, who expects more than a simple temporal progression from the kings of early Rome to the civil wars of the first century BC. What we seem to be presented with in this passage is a naïve chronicle, but the implicit temporal progression appears to us as the false appearance beneath which we must probe.[8] Precisely the disjunction between the different statements, the absence of explicit links, evokes the idea of a hidden reality, a true relationship between these different aspects of power.

   One series of relationships we could invent depends upon the notion of time, which is also explicit in the passage. The different aspects of power here seem to be differentiated in part by their duration, and terms recur which convey the time-bound nature of power (*ad tempus*, *ultra biennium*, *neque diu*, *non longa*, *cito*). The three modes of rule which are not explicitly time-bound are monarchy in the first sentence, 'liberty and the consulship' (*libertas et consulatus*) in the second, and 'command in the name of princeps' (*imperium nomine principis*) at the end. While we can

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[7] Koestermann (1963) 58, for example, regards Tacitus' practice here as an avoidance of the same terms on stylistic grounds. The politics of judging whether terms are synonymous, oppositional or 'mere' variety is discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

[8] White (1978) 93 discusses such reliance on 'mere' temporal progression as 'the ironic denial that historical series have any kind of larger significance or describe any imaginable plot structure . . . [w]e could conceive such accounts of history as intending to serve as antidotes to their false or overemplotted counterparts and could represent them as an ironic return to mere chronicle as constituting the only sense which any cognitively responsible history could take'.

read the institution of liberty and the consulship as putting an end to monarchy, the most pressing question for the reader is whether we see liberty and the consulship as ending with the establishment of Augustus' *imperium*. The over-riding sense of types of power giving way one to another, which is conveyed by the insistence on their temporality, suggests that this is the case. But the absence of explicit conjunctions means that the responsibility for this interpretation rests upon the reader, who could equally decide to read liberty and the consulship as continuing to exist under Augustus' command.[9]

Moreover, any interpretation of the relationship between Brutus' institution and Augustus' *imperium* will affect and be affected by the relationship implied between the early kings of Rome and the new princeps. If these three types of rule (monarchy, oligarchy, principate) delineate and replace one another, what precise relationship does the reader invent between monarchy and principate? Tacitus leaves the historical interpretation here very much up to the reader by his opening statement 'the city of Rome from the beginning was ruled by kings', where no abstract noun for power is used, and even the verb 'to rule' can be translated in terms of possession, as 'to have' or 'to hold'. The reader is left to judge what the rule of kings would be called, to 'translate' this sentence as *imperium* or *dominatio* or whatever.

Tacitus' opening paragraph lacks a plot, reacting to the over-determination of Roman history by an ironic return to simple chronology as a means of understanding the past. But the irony of this chronicle is that it imposes on the reader the responsibility to create a plot in order to make 'full' sense of the passage. Whether they read the successive modes of power as progress, decline or cycle, they are implicated from the very outset of the narrative in the process and politics of historical interpretation.

In this way the process of scrutiny which the historian enacts in setting up false appearance against hidden truth continually invites the reader to join in, to scrutinise the text and decode its hidden meanings. As I stated at the outset of this section, a final decoding of Tacitus would ultimately be a different, a non-Tacitean work. On the other hand, a simple acceptance of what Tacitus says would seem also to be a singularly non-

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[9] One interpretation which could be made from this passage is that, if liberty is bound up in the office of consul, the continuation of consulships in the principate stands as a sign of liberty under Augustus. Another interpretation would be to read this association of liberty and consulship alongside the conclusion to book 1 (quoted above), where Tiberius' ambiguous control over the candidate list is read as a sign that liberty is dead.

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Tacitean activity. (I find it difficult to believe that the ideal reader of Tacitus is not a sceptical reader.) A reading practice that would more effectively mirror Tacitus' own sceptical enquiry would involve scrutiny of the text for what it says and how it says it, but would not aim to privilege one over the other so much as acknowledge their ongoing dynamic relationship.

THE IRONIC TRADITION

The term which above all others shapes this way of thinking about history is the term 'irony', which places an unquantifiable distinction between a statement and 'its' meaning. Hayden White, whose analyses of history-writing have been enormously influential over the last thirty years, characterises the ironic historian as follows:

> Anyone who originally encodes the world in the mode of metaphor, will be inclined to decode it – that is, narratively 'explicate' and discursively analyze it – as a congeries of individualities. To those for whom there is no real resemblance in the world, decodation must take the form of a disclosure, either of the simple *contiguity* of things (the mode of metonymy) or of the *contrast* that lies hidden within every resemblance or unity (the mode of irony).[10]

If we take the example I used earlier, that of Augustus' claim to have restored the republic, we can see how this claim encodes Augustus' acts in the metaphor of return to the past, and how this claim enforces a particular attitude not only to Augustus' acts but also to the past, as something worth returning to. A sceptical historian, disclosing a contrast between that claim and what he calls the truth (perhaps Augustus' establishment of the principate), is operating within the mode of irony in his representation of Augustus' acts, but his analysis too depends upon a representation of the past as something worth restoring. The difference is that the historian, unlike Augustus, maintains that the restoration does not *really* take place.

Tacitus' unmasking of the realities of power operating in the principate could be described as 'a disclosure ... of the contrast that lies hidden within every resemblance or unity'. But disclosure and decoding, as we have already seen, are processes which inherently value the disclosed or decoded phenomenon at the expense of that which obscures or encodes; since the obscurity is an important part of reading Tacitus we need to be

[10] White (1978) 128.