

HISTORIANS OF DISILLUSIONMENT

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What does a comparison of Thucydides and Tacitus reveal? For Sir Ronald Syme, reading the Greek historian against his Roman successor exposes a shared style. Thucydides underscored his disenchantment through an abrupt and dense mode of expression. Syme argues that this 'sombre and subversive habit of discourse' finds its way through Sallust to Tacitus. For Tacitus, Thucydides is 'an ancestor in the annals of disillusionment.'¹ Resonances between Thucydides and Tacitus, however, continue well beyond issues of style. How does disenchantment shape the treatment of the past by Thucydides and Tacitus? To address this question, this paper compares the preface of Thucydides to the introductory section of the *Annals*.

Ellen O'Gorman takes up the idea of disillusionment in her analysis of the *Annals*. She regards Tacitus as part of a tradition of historiography that has its origins with Thucydides. The defining feature of this approach to the past is scepticism. The historian exposes the disjuncture between appearance and reality. Rejecting superficial explanations, the sceptical historian seeks to reveal underlying causes. This involves the presentation of both the outward appearance of events and the hidden reality of the past. Drawing on Hayden White, O'Gorman argues that this mode of representation is ironic.² Although this view has merit in terms of highlighting the importance of scepticism and irony in Thucydidean and Tacitean history, deconstructionist analyses treat texts as literary artefacts in which authorial intent is irrelevant. This is not useful. Furthermore, the views of Hayden White are not accepted by most historians.³ Resonances between Thucydides and Tacitus have not received the attention that they warrant. Before exploring these matters, it is necessary to outline the structure of each preface.

Thucydides designed an introduction that is twenty-three chapters in length and is divided into three parts. The first section (1.1.1-3) introduces the historian and subject. Thucydides claims that the work represents an account of the greatest upheaval experienced by the Hellenes (1.1.2). The second part is an analysis of the remote past: the *Archaeology* (1.2-21.1). This enables Thucydides to defend his initial claim and to display his historical method.⁴ The closing section (1.21.2-23.3) consists of a reflection on method, a reaffirmation of the importance of the subject, and a statement about the causes of the war. In this way, the structure of the preface is shaped by an argument concerning the greatness of the war. Thucydides clarifies the meaning of greatness in these chapters; by the end of the *Archaeology* it is clear that the term measures the upheaval suffered as a result of the Peloponnesian War.⁵ This is central

1 R. Syme, 'Thucydides', in *Roman Papers*, vol. 6, ed. A.R. Birley (Oxford 1991), 84.

2 E. O'Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge 2000), 2f.; H.V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore 1978), 10.

3 For a very helpful discussion of these issues see Ronald Mellor's review of *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (*BMCR* 15 August 2000). See also Konrad Heldmann, *Gnomon* 47 (2002), 215-18.

4 W.R. Connor, 'Narrative Discourse in Thucydides', in A.E. Raubitschek (ed.), *The Greek Historians: Literature and History Papers Presented to A.E. Raubitschek* (Saratoga 1985), 7: 'The opening twenty-three chapters are a short, highly selective inquiry into some aspects of the past and constitute an *epideixis*, a demonstration piece, showing what Thucydides' method can do. They constitute an implicit *a fortiori* argument. If Thucydides' powerful engine can extract such a compelling interpretation of the remote past, *a fortiori* it should be able to attain important results in interpreting and analysing the recent past.'

5 J.J. Price, 'A Puzzle in Thucydides 1.18', *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997), 665-76.

to Thucydidean disillusionment. It is the task of the historian to reveal the terrible impact of the war.

Although Thucydides gives his preface a distinct structure, the issue is far less clear in Tacitus. Scholars have defined the preface in different ways. For Syme, the introduction consists of the prologue (1.1) and the overview of the reign of Augustus (1.2-5). The main narrative opens with Tiberius (1.6). He divides the prologue into two parts: Roman government from the foundation of the city to Augustus and an overview of its historiography. He suggests that this first chapter should be printed as two paragraphs.⁶ Eric Koestermann, on the other hand, holds that the introduction is fifteen chapters in length.⁷ Anton Leeman argues that Syme ignores the thematic unity of the first chapter and supports Koestermann by identifying the following sections: the prologue (1.1), a sketch of the reign of Augustus (1.2-5), the introduction of Tiberius (1.6-8), the obituaries of Augustus (1.9-10), the role of the Senate in the accession of Tiberius (1.11-14) and constitutional implications of the Principate (1.15).⁸ According to this view, the main narrative starts with the mutiny of the Pannonian legions (1.16). F.R.D. Goodyear regards the initial four chapters as the preface; Ronald Martin and Tony Woodman include only the first three.⁹ Irrespective of these debates, it is clear that central concerns of the historian are evident in the first five chapters. This approach is affirmed by the fact that the opening sentence of the Tiberian narrative (1.6.1) parallels the beginning of the Neronian hexad (13.1.1).

How does Thucydides introduce his subject? Having introduced himself and his intention to write an account of the conflict between Athens and the Peloponnesians, Thucydides states that ‘He began the task at the outset of the war, in the belief that it would be great and noteworthy above all wars that had gone before, inferring this from the fact that both powers were at their best in preparedness for war in every way, and seeing the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides with one state or the other, some at once, others planning to do so’ (1.1.1). Thucydides portrays himself as a writer of foresight, taking up a task that would have developed as events unfolded. He uses the word *kinesis* (1.1.2), meaning a disturbance, to describe the effect of the war.¹⁰ This may be a biological metaphor, referring to the convulsion in an organism.¹¹ The historian examines the nature of this upheaval. Although Thucydides presents his work as having enduring relevance (1.22.4), the main text offers little reason for optimism

6 R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958), 304.

7 E. Koestermann, ‘Der Eingang der Annalen des Tacitus’, *Historia* 10 (1961), 330-55.

8 A.D. Leeman, ‘Structure and Meaning in the Prologues of Tacitus’, *YCS* 23 (1973), 196: ‘The whole chapter is dominated and held together by one idea—that of history as a subject for historiography. It is the eagle flying high and surveying the *post conditam urbem octingentos et viginti annos prioris aevi*, in search of his prey and defining it as the monarchic tendencies discernible even under the Republic.’

9 F.R.D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus 1: Annals 1.1-54* (Cambridge 1972), 8; R.H. Martin and A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus Annals Book IV* (Cambridge 1989), 13.

10 A.W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1 (Oxford 1945), 91. The term has a scientific resonance: see W.R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton 1984), 21 n.4. See also T.J. Luce, *The Greek Historians* (London 1997), 70.

11 S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1 (Oxford 1991), 6. This reflects the organic metaphor of the state at work in the text (2.64.3; 6.18.6): see S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (London 1987), 172-82. It is possible that the term encompasses both the events that preceded the war and the conflict itself: see N.G.L. Hammond, ‘The Arrangement of the Thought in the Proem and Other Parts of Thucydides I’, *CQ* 46 (1952), 132f.

about the ability of individuals to learn.¹² This is an important manifestation of Thucydidean disillusionment.

Tacitus does not begin with a straightforward statement of his objectives. His first sentence is the initial part of a coded statement of purpose: ‘The City of Rome from its inception was held by kings; freedom and the consulship were established by L. Brutus’ (1.1.1). The initial words, *urbem Romam*, indicate a focus on the capital. He presents freedom (*libertas*) as synonymous with the institutions of the Republic. The opening sentence forms the basis of the reflection on the demise of liberty that occupies the opening of the text.¹³ The historian outlines the process by which Rome returned to rule by one man. Friedrich Klinger regards this as a history of *libertas*, but it is best read as an account of threats to freedom.¹⁴ The opening of the *Annals* may seem to imply that the triumph of Augustus represents the restoration of order, but this reading is soon disrupted by the disillusioned vision of Tacitus.¹⁵

Before exploring the history of the Julio-Claudian successors of Augustus, the historian presents a brief overview of the reign of the first Princeps. He captures the creation of the Principate in a single sentence.¹⁶ Having brought the struggle for control of Rome to an end, Augustus cloaks his power in the forms of the Republic: ‘he, putting aside the name of triumvir, presented himself as consul and as content with his tribunician prerogative for protecting the plebs; but, when he had enticed the soldiery with gifts, the people with food, and everyone with the sweetness of inactivity, he rose up gradually and drew to himself the responsibilities of senate, magistracies and laws’ (1.2.1). The process that the Princeps uses to consolidate his power is hypocritical and pervasive. Tacitus strives to reveal this truth. He does so in a way that reflects his disenchantment with the Roman people. The writer depicts them as compliant in the process of subjugation. It soon becomes apparent that the Principate requires the re-invention of the ideal of *virtus* (service to the state). This can no longer be rendered in the republican manner; bravery is the *virtus* of those who endure tyranny.¹⁷

12 S. Florey, ‘The Meaning of 1.22.4 and the Usefulness of Thucydides’ History’, *CJ* 85 (1989), 206: ‘Thucydides may have begun writing with the belief that his history could teach men to anticipate all or almost all of the consequences of present actions and thus be useful in a broad and more positive sense. The book which Thucydides has left us, however, appears conclusively to disprove such optimistic notions of the usefulness of historical knowledge.’ See also R. Lisle, ‘Thucydides 1.22.4’, *CJ* 72 (1977), 342-47; J. Malitz, ‘Thukydidies’ Weg zur Geschichtsschreibung’, *Historia* 31 (1982), 257-89; T.F. Scanlon, ‘“The Clear Truth” in Thucydides 1.22.4’, *Historia* 51 (2002), 131-48.

13 C. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge 1950), 163: ‘Tacitus seems to have regarded the freedom of the Senate as freedom *par excellence*. Nevertheless, to him, unlike Cicero, political institutions are not the fullest expression of political life but only the framework in which political life is set. That constitutional framework matters but it does not matter most. What matters most is how people use their institutions, not what their institutions are.’ See M. Morford, ‘How Tacitus Defined Liberty’, *ANRW* 2.33.5 (1991), 3420-50. For liberty and historiography, see J. Moles, ‘Cry Freedom: Tacitus: *Annals* 4.32-35’, *Histos* 2 (1998) <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1998/moles.html>>.

14 F. Klinger, *Tacitus über Augustus und Tiberius: Interpretationen zum Eingang der Annalen* (München 1954), 627; cf. M.M. Sage, ‘Tacitus’ Historical Works’, *ANRW* 2.33.2 (1990), 971 n.611.

15 Syme (n.6 above), 364.

16 R.H. Martin, *Tacitus* (London 1981), 108: ‘But this colossal sentence not only mirrors the magnitude of the task Octavian set himself; the means—bribery—by which he attained his end, and the nature of his goal—autocracy veiled by the manipulation of republican institutions—are clearly described. The whole is a masterly epitome of Tacitus’ verdict on the true nature of the Augustan principate.’

17 R. Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (London 1999), 94f.

Thucydides and Tacitus share far more than an austere style. They present narratives of worlds gone wrong. Thucydides explores the turmoil caused by the Peloponnesian War. The great war causes great suffering. Tacitus exposes the demise of freedom in Julio-Claudian Rome. Romans acquiesce to subjugation by the Principate. Both historians construct narratives of upheaval. Disruption and decline pervade these accounts of the past. Rather than accepting superficial explanations, they expose hidden realities. This shapes how Thucydides and Tacitus present themselves as historians. Their histories are not written in isolation from works of other writers. In order to construct such visions of the past, Thucydides and Tacitus engage with other texts. They use such references to stress both difference and continuity.

Intertextual references can set a text against other works. Thucydides uses a range of such links; these enable him to present himself as a historian of disillusionment. The opening sentence is a key example: Thucydides opens his work in the same way as Herodotus by providing his name and *polis*. Next, Thucydides uses the verb *sungraphein* ('to write up') to describe his task. This creates a sense of the historian compiling or reporting the account.¹⁸ The corresponding term in Herodotus is *historein* ('to inquire').¹⁹ Like Herodotus, Thucydides offers an account of the past, but it will be presented with unparalleled precision. Herodotus is honoured and eclipsed.²⁰ The effect is to present the text as a technical treatise.²¹ Language defines the historian.

The engagement of Thucydides with Homer and Herodotus is evident in his discussion of their subject matter. He names Homer, but references to Herodotus are indirect. Thucydides contends that previous conflicts lacked the duration, suffering and political upheaval of the Peloponnesian War (1.23.1-2). Thucydides reworks Homeric material to highlight his method of historical analysis. He accepts the heroic age as historical, but subjects legend to rational analysis. Thucydides argues that power motivates Agamemnon (1.9.1). Naval strength, rather than the promises of suitors, led to war against Troy. This foreshadows a key theme of the main narrative: naval power offers the foundation of empire.²²

Thucydides exposes flaws in the work of his competitors. He writes that certain Hellenes have misunderstood the political machinery associated with Spartan kings (1.20.3). This refers to the work of Herodotus (6.57.5). Thucydides also notes that some people believe in a non-existent Spartan military group (1.20.3). This alludes to the treatment of the Pitonate regiment by Herodotus (9.53.2). These points enable Thucydides to demonstrate his detailed understanding of Sparta. This affirms the Pan-Hellenic quality of his writing. Turning to less illustrious rivals, he condemns their lack of rigour in their research (1.21.1). He dismisses

18 Hornblower (n.11 above *Thucydides*), 7-12.

19 Hornblower (n.11 above *Commentary*), 5: 'Having conformed to Herodotean tradition in the first two words Th. distances himself with the third.' See also Gomme (n.10 above), 89.

20 S. Hornblower, 'Narratology and Narrative Techniques in Thucydides', in *Greek Historiography* (Oxford 1994), 138f.: 'The opening of the whole work can be seen as an act of simultaneous homage to and rebellion against Herodotus, a relationship comparable to that between Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad*, as expressed in the first lines of the two epics.'

21 W.R. Connor, 'Thucydides', in T.J. Luce (ed.), *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome* (New York 1982), 278.

22 C.G. Starr, 'Thucydides on Sea Power', *Mnemosyne* 31 (1978), 343-50; A. French, 'Thucydides and the Power Syndrome', *G&R* 27 (1980), 22-30; R.J. Rabel, 'Agamemnon's Empire in Thucydides', *CJ* 80 (1984), 8-10; L. Kallet-Marx, *Money, Expense and Naval Power in Thucydides' History 1-5.24* (Berkeley 1993), 27-30; A.V. Zadorojnyi, 'Thucydides' Nicias and Homer's Agamemnon', *CQ* 48 (1998), 298-313.

them as mere storytellers (*logographoi*).²³ Such intertextual references highlight the distinctive achievement of Thucydides. By contrasting his method of research with his rivals, he lays the foundation for his own historical vision. Despite honouring Homer and Herodotus, Thucydides positions his accomplishment against their work. He presents neither method nor subject as a straightforward continuation of the past. The disruption that he depicts necessitates some degree of discontinuity with his rivals.

Tacitus creates a speaking position by situating himself alongside great republican historians: 'The Roman people of old, however, had their successes and adversities recalled by brilliant writers; and to tell of Augustus' times there was no dearth of deserving talents, until they were deterred by swelling sycophancy. The affairs of Tiberius and Gaius, as of Claudius and Nero, were falsified through dread while the men themselves flourished, and composed with hatred fresh after their fall' (1.1.2). This dismissal of imperial historians exemplifies the convention in Roman historiography of accusing earlier writers of bias to justify appropriation of their subject matter.²⁴ It is crucial to note, however, that the subject of the *Annals* is presented as the cause of this decay. Just as the Roman people have surrendered to corruption, so too has the Principate infected historiography. Later, Tacitus cautions against comparing his work with republican histories. Earlier writers recorded the glories of the Republic, but Tacitus exposes the bleak political life of the capital. This fails to provide the events that readers enjoy (4.33.3). It may seem that Tacitus has been denied the opportunity to excel, but the Principate presents a greater challenge than that faced by historians of the Republic. Thus, Tacitus deserves greater acclaim.²⁵

Intertextual links in the *Annals* are not confined to the works of other writers. The introduction assumes a detailed understanding of the introductory chapter of the *Histories*.²⁶ The preface of the *Histories* (1.1-11) is more extensive than that of the *Annals*. In this work, Tacitus begins by setting out the subject and positions his text against earlier works (1.1.1). He offers a summary of the project (1.1.2-3) and a description of the condition of Rome (1.1.4-11). Tony Woodman suggests that the preface to the *Histories* is Ciceronian, whereas the opening of the *Annals* represents a rejection of this style.²⁷ This overstates the case: Tacitus signals his debt to Sallust by starting with the first day of the consular year, rather than with the demise of Nero.²⁸ In the *Annals*, Tacitus selects the birth of dynastic rule.²⁹ This ignores promises in the *Agricola* (3.3) and the *Histories* (1.1.17) to record more recent times. This discontinuity reflects a deepening interest in the Principate. The success that Tacitus achieved under the Principate did not blind him to the nature of the system.

23 *Logographoi* (1.21.1) is a term of derision, rather than a technical category; see Connor (n.10 above), 28 and 66 n. 37. Tacitus gives a similar warning (3.19.2) against enticing stories that have no basis in truth; see T.P. Wiseman, 'Thucydides on *logographoi*: A Modern Parallel?', *Histos* 1 (1997) <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1997/wiseman.html>>. Thucydidean allusion extends beyond Homer and Herodotus; see T.Rood, 'Thucydides and His Predecessors', *Histos* 2 (1998) <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1998/rood.html>>.

24 J. Marincola, 'Tacitus' Prefaces and the Decline of Imperial Historiography', *Latomus* 58 (1999), 391-404. On bias in ancient historiography, see T.J. Luce, 'Ancient Views of Causes of Bias in Historical Writing', *CPh* 84 (1989), 28.

25 J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge 1997), 251.

26 R.G. Tanner, 'The Development of Thought and Style in Tacitus', *ANRW* 2.33.4 (1991), 2687-2751.

27 A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (London 1988), 164-68.

28 A.D. Leeman, 'Structure and Meaning in the Prologues of Tacitus', *YCS* 23 (1973), 176.

29 Syme (n.6 above), 369; Martin (n.16 above), 108.

Despite the fact that Thucydides and Tacitus react against the work of their predecessors, both depend upon these rivals. The debt of Thucydides to Herodotus is evident in the opening line of the text. For Simon Hornblower, continuities rest in three areas: the aim to capture the recent past, the intention to write for a wide audience and preparedness to adopt poetic techniques.³⁰ Each of these elements is present in the preface. Both writers regard war as a catalyst for change and present that view in their prefaces.³¹ Later, Thucydides uses the *Pentecontaetia* to bridge the wars and thus the texts. The depiction of Greek history in the *Archaeology* and the emphasis on the widespread impact of the war demonstrate the Pan-Hellenism of Thucydides. Like Herodotus, Thucydides engages with epic and employs Homeric devices. He adopts Homeric techniques later in the depiction of war.³²

The allusive nature of the *Annals* has long been recognised by classical scholars.³³ The opening sentence evokes the historical monographs of Sallust.³⁴ There may be a second such allusion later in the preface (1.1.3).³⁵ Tacitus draws on Sallust to signal that he will present the past in a similar way. Tacitus is influenced by the style of his republican predecessor. This is evident in the compression, abruptness and variation of language. Similarities between the two historians, however, extend beyond matters of style. The prominent intertextual references to Sallust frame the text as a history of discord. Sallustian pessimism concerning Roman political life finds full force in Tacitus. Tacitus adopts the annalistic form that Sallust employs in his final work. Judith Ginsberg holds that Tacitus subverts the conventions of annalistic history to expose the façade of the Principate.³⁶ John Rich takes issue with Ginsberg, arguing that Tacitus selects from a set of conventions within the annalistic tradition.³⁷ This is the most convincing position. Tacitus adopts forms that would have governed the works of his rivals. He constructs his disenchanted vision of the past within a tradition of senatorial history. For the intended audience, meaning depends on these continuities.

The relationship between history and epic was particularly strong in Rome. Tacitus saw Virgil as a great predecessor who grappled with the moral character of the state.³⁸ Tacitus opens the text in dactylic hexameter: the metrical form of epic poetry. This may represent an allusion to Quintus Ennius.³⁹ Syme and Goodyear reject the existence of the hexameter.⁴⁰ It is

30 Hornblower (n.11 above *Thucydides*), 26-28. See also J.L. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides', in C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter 1993), 88-121; T. Rood, 'Thucydides' Persian Wars', in C.S. Kraus (ed.), *The Limits of Historiography: Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts* (Leiden 1999), 141-68.

31 J. Corbet, 'Herodotus and Thucydides on War', in I.S. Moxon, J.D. Smart and A.J. Woodman (eds.), *Past Perspectives: Studies in Greek and Roman History Writing* (Cambridge 1986), 6.

32 C.J. Mackie, 'Homer and Thucydides: Corcyra and Sicily', *CQ* 46 (1996), 103-13; J.W. Allison, 'Homeric Allusions at the Close of Thucydides' Sicilian Narrative', *AJP* 118 (1997), 499-516. On the mediation of Homeric influences by Herodotus, see E.H. Havelock, 'War as a Way of Life in Classical Culture,' in É. Gareau (ed.), *Valeurs Antiques et Temps Modernes/Classical Values in the Modern World* (Ottawa 1972), 19-78.

33 Syme (n.6 above), 727: 'Prose or poetry, Tacitus had a subtle ear and a memory for words that never faded. He can blend echoes of different writers without danger of incongruity.'

34 Woodman (n.27 above), 167f.

35 A.J. Woodman, 'The Preface to the *Annals*: More Sallust?', in *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford 1998), 21f. Tacitus alludes to a claim to impartiality made by Sallust (*BC* 4.1-2).

36 J. Ginsberg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (Salem 1984).

37 J. Rich, 'Structuring Roman History: The Consular Year and the Roman Historical Tradition', *Histos* 1 (1997) <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1997/rich1.html>>.

38 H.W. Benario, 'Virgil and Tacitus', *CJ* 63 (1967), 24-27; R.T.S. Baxter, 'Virgil's Influence on Tacitus in Books I and II of the *Annals*', *CPh* 67 (1972), 246-69; E. Henry (B. Walker), 'Virgilian Elements in Tacitus' Historical Imagination', *ANRW* 2.33.4 (1991), 2987-3005.

39 V. Lundström, 'Nya Enniusfragment', *Eranos* 15 (1915), 1-24.

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difficult, however, to believe that Tacitus would have failed to reflect on the lyric qualities of the first sentence of his masterpiece. Interestingly, John Moles notes that such allusions are present in Livy and Tacitus when they explore early Rome.⁴¹ If the hexameter is intentional, then Tacitean disenchantment takes on an epic quality.

Thucydides and Tacitus share an identity as historians of disillusionment. The Greek historian presents the war as a plague that afflicts Hellas. For Tacitus, Rome suffers from the disease that is the Principate. For both historians, knowledge about the past is not self-evident. It is the task of the historian to reveal underlying truths. Their works of disenchantment are enmeshed in intertextual relationships that involve continuity and difference. The historians seek to highlight the distinctiveness of their visions, but find themselves bound within intertextual continuities. Despite the fact that they subject other texts to criticism, they depend on these works for readers to construct meaning. Thucydides and Tacitus grapple with upheaval and decay. They write a distinctive form of history that bridges Greece and Rome.

40 Syme (n.6 above), 357; Goodyear (n.9 above), 89-91.

41 J. Moles, 'Livy's Preface', *PCPS* 39 (1993), 141-68.