

ALTERNATIVE EMPIRES:
TACITUS'S VIRTUAL HISTORY
OF THE PISONIAN PRINCIPATE

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To understand how it actually was, we therefore need to
understand *how it actually wasn't*.

Niall Ferguson

When L. Calpurnius Piso Licinianus died at the temple of Vesta on the 14th of January, A.D. 69, he had been a Caesar for four days—*quadriduo Caesar* (Tacitus *Histories* 1.48.1)—and could be said to have acted out the final episode in the history of the Pisonian emperors.¹ Tacitus's brief obituary of this Piso touches on the futility of his accession to power: "In his hasty adoption, he had been preferred over his elder brother to this end only, that he would be slaughtered first" ("properata adoptione ad hoc tantum maiori fratri praelatus est ut prior occideretur," *Hist.* 1.48.1).²

Earlier, after Piso's adoption by the emperor Galba, Tacitus remarks that "in the four days that elapsed between his adoption and his murder, nothing was said or done by Piso in public" ("nec aliud sequenti quadriduo, quod medium inter adoptionem et caedem fuit, dictum a Pisone in publico factumve," *Hist.* 1.19.1).³ Piso's "cameo" in the role of Caesar,

1 For the stemmata of the Pisonian families, see Tables XVII and XXV in Syme 1986. The initial arguments for revising the genealogies of *PIR*² were made by Syme 1960.

2 The text of the *Histories* is from Wellesley 1989, of the *Annals* from Heubner 1983. All translations are my own.

3 A curious counterfactual statement, for when news comes of Otho's appeal to the praetorian guard, Piso delivers a lengthy address to the troops on guard duty at the Palatine (*Hist.* 1.29.2–30.3).

then, appears purely symbolic: he does not *act* as Caesar but is only *named* as Caesar—this is symbolic but not in a meaningful sense;⁴ the only time Tacitus names Piso as “Caesar,” as we have seen, he modifies the title with *quadriduo*. This empties the term Caesar of potential as effectively as a one-day consulship undermines the authority of consul.

Piso Licinianus’s irruption into the *Histories* is sudden and, it seems, deliberately so; when Tacitus turns to Galba’s plans for adopting a successor he mentions only one name of the many touted by gossiping Romans⁵ or by Galba’s own advisers: Marcus Salvius Otho, billed as if he were the “natural” successor to the late emperor Nero: “since he was popular with most of the soldiers, and the court of Nero inclined in his favor as being like their former master” (“faventibus plerisque militum, prona in eum aula Neronis ut similem,” *Hist.* 1.13.4). Only when Galba calls a meeting of advisers and senior statesmen and announces his successor does the name of Piso appear, giving the strong impression that history, and the narrative, have taken a dramatic swerve away from its expected course. The short character sketch that Tacitus appends retrospectively smoothes over the abruptness of Piso’s introduction by presenting him as if he were the “natural” successor to Galba (*Hist.* 1.14.2):⁶

Piso was the son of Marcus Crassus and of Scribonia, so noble on both sides; in his expression and manner, he was old-fashioned, austere according to the right judgment, but to those who read him less well he appeared morose. That aspect of his character at which the worried populace looked askance was precisely what pleased his adoptive parent.

Piso M. Crasso et Scribonia genitus, nobilis utrimque, vultu habituque moris antiqui, et aestimatione recta severus, deterius interpretantibus tristior habebatur: ea pars morum eius, quo suspectior sollicitis, adoptanti placebat.

4 Haynes 2003.57–60 offers a more complex reading of Piso’s abandonment of the symbolic status of “Caesar.”

5 Tac. *Hist.* 1.12.2–3; on the role of speculative talk in the narrative and its relation to virtual history, see below.

6 Thus Damon 2003.136.

In the event, no aspect of Piso's character is given the space to be elaborated on the public stage;⁷ five days and thirty chapters later, his adopted father is dead, and his own decapitated head is handed over to the new emperor Otho.

Why then is Piso Licinianus so important? The usual answer is that his adoption by Galba prefigures Nerva's adoption of Trajan in A.D. 97, in the aftermath of which Tacitus embarked on his career as a historian (Chilver 1979.75, Grainger 2002.37). But we could also see Piso here, paradoxically, as the end of a dynasty. This is paradoxical because, in a strict chronological sense, he seems rather to inaugurate a new dynasty (albeit an abortive one) rather than to mark the end of an old one. But if we look again at Piso's emphatic introduction as a move away from Otho, towards whom the narrative appears to be tending, we can see his story in the light of *virtual* history, that is, the exploration of possible alternative histories.⁸ From this perspective, the four-day Caesar stands as a belated answer to the question: "What if Piso became emperor?" I say "belated," because this question could most obviously have been posed about the year A.D. 65, during C. Calpurnius Piso's⁹ conspiracy against the emperor Nero, though as we will see, there are other places in history where this question might be put. But Piso Licinianus, as we have also seen, represents not so much a belated answer as a belated failure to answer: he says and does almost nothing, and dies before he can show us what an emperor Piso might be.

The exploration of alternative histories, where results unfold from the contingencies of one event, has most frequently been introduced by such a question as the one I've posed above, beginning with the words "What if?" The most popular contemporary example is, perhaps, "What if Hitler had won the Second World War?," but we also find: "What if the Gunpowder Plot succeeded?"¹⁰ or "What if the Persians won at Salamis?"¹¹ In ancient history, the best known instance is Livy's "What if Alexander had invaded

7 Piso's speech to the troops, as Damon 2003.159–602 analyzes, displays only Piso's "refusal to acknowledge a reality that falls short of ideal" (160).

8 Pagán 197 in this volume articulates this phenomenon as "sideshadowing."

9 The precise family link between C. Calpurnius Piso and L. Calpurnius Piso Licinianus remains unknown, though they are part of the same clan, and Licinianus's niece Calpurnia may have been married to C. Calpurnius Piso's son, Calpurnius Galerianus (on whom see below).

10 Antonia Fraser in Roberts 2004.27–39.

11 Victor Davis Hanson in Cowley 2001.15–36.

Italy?"—which I will look at below. But what I will argue in the first part of this article is that Tacitus, at different points in his *Histories* and *Annals*, gestures towards an alternative history that runs, as it were, in parallel to the actual history of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties: namely, the virtual history of the Pisonian dynasty. By choosing a virtual history that is imperial rather than republican, moreover, Tacitus makes a further political point about the principate: its emergence is not entirely contingent upon the existence and actions of the individual who happens to hold the position of *princeps*, but rather it is deeply embedded as a mode of political thinking and political desire in the aristocracy and plebs of first-century A.D. Rome.

A PLETHORA OF PISONES

Names of a more familiar contour can still be a source of perplexity. The senatorial annals of Tiberius' principate carry a plethora of persons, among them the recurrent and aristocratic members of a few families.

Ronald Syme

In the *Histories* of Tacitus, Piso Licinianus is not the last, or even the second last, Pisonian dynast, although he does represent some sort of (anti-)climax; the last two Pisones, however, replay more emphatically the characteristics and perils of their clan. The very last, L. Piso, the proconsul of Africa, is killed on suspicion of imperial desires.¹² Whether he intends to become emperor is unclear—*incertum* (*Hist.* 4.49.1)—he remains unmoved by those exhorting him to seize power: “nihil ad ea moto Pisone” (4.49.2), and when the people of Carthage clamor for his presence, he shuts himself in his house: “non in publicum egressus est . . . clausus intra domum” (4.49.4). What this Piso demonstrates in microcosm, however, is that an individual is constituted as aspirant emperor by the desires of those around him.¹³ Piso has all the attributes of a pretender: advisers, an excitable mob, threat of assassination . . . and an impersonator. Faced with the assassin, Piso's slave attempts to save his master by appropriating his identity: a noble lie, *egregio mendacio* (4.50.2), but an act, too, that echoes the impersonations

12 Damon 268–69 also discusses the proconsul's death.

13 This is an attribute of successful as well as unsuccessful aspirants; see Ash 1999a.109 on the representations of both Vitellius and Vespasian.

of Julio-Claudian family members, most notably the “false Nero” of *Histories* 2.8.¹⁴ By presenting us with a “false Piso,” this slave implicitly directs us to consider his master as an imperial Piso.

This Piso has already lost his cousin and brother-in-law Calpurnius Galerianus (*Hist.* 4.11.2):

He [Calpurnius] was the son of Gaius Piso, but had ventured no rash act: nevertheless, his name was an illustrious one, and the people made the noble acts of his youth well-known by spreading stories, and in a city still unsettled and welcoming talk of revolution, there were still men who would be inclined to spread empty rumors about him seeking the principate. By the order of Mucianus, he was put under military arrest so that his death would not be made remarkable by occurring in the city itself, and he was marched out to the fortieth milestone on the Appian Way, and killed by having his veins emptied of blood.

is fuit filius Gai Pisonis, nihil ausus: sed nomen insigne et decora ipsius iuventa rumore vulgi celebrabantur, erantque in civitate adhuc turbida et novis sermonibus laeta qui principatus inanem ei famam circumdarent. iussu Muciani custodia militari cinctus, ne in ipsa urbe conspectior mors foret, ad quadragensimum ab urbe lapidem Appia via fuso per venas sanguine extinguitur.

Like his cousin, Calpurnius is suspected largely because of the attitudes of others towards him, but what we see more clearly in this passage is how the kind of thinking we might associate with virtual history positions Calpurnius as an aspiring emperor. The son of that Piso who conspired against Nero in A.D. 65, he is the heir to the alternative dynasty, the Pisonian principate. The kind of thinking that asks the question: “What if Piso had become emperor in A.D. 65?” is also producing the empty rumors and the stories spread about Calpurnius. Thus to understand “how it actually was” that the rumors about Calpurnius had such political impact, we

14 Impersonations of Julio-Claudians include the false Agrippa Postumus (*Ann.* 2.39–40) and the false Drusus son of Germanicus (*Ann.* 5.10). On the false Nero, see Tuplin 1989.

need to understand “how it actually wasn’t”: what political potentialities were so brutally suppressed by his murder.

We can expand upon this point if we compare what Tacitus tells us about Calpurnius with his character sketch of the father in the *Annals* (*Ann.* 15.48.2–4):

He was born into the clan of Calpurnius and, through his father’s nobility, he was involved with many illustrious families, and he had a good reputation among the plebs because of his virtue or appearance of virtue. For he made use of his eloquence for the benefit of citizens, practiced generosity towards his friends, and even to strangers he was affable in speech and conversation; he also had the good fortune of height and good looks, but his manners were far from austere and he was not at all miserly in pleasure; he indulged in frivolity and showiness and sometimes luxury, and this was approved by many who wished in a climate of laxness for an emperor who was not restrained or severe.

is Calpurnio genere ortus ac multas insignisque familias paterna nobilitate complexus, claro apud vulgum rumore erat per virtutem aut species virtutibus similis. namque facundiam tuendis civibus exercebat, largitionem adversum amicos, et ignotis quoque comi sermone et congressu; aderant etiam fortuita, corpus procerum, decora facies: sed procul gravitas morum aut voluptatum parsimonia; levitatis ac magnificentiae et aliquando luxu indulgebat, idque pluribus probabatur qui in tanta vitiorum dulcedine summum imperium non restrictum nec perseverum volunt.

The first sentence of Piso’s character sketch is close to that of his son; both are represented first in terms of their illustrious family—*nomen insigne* for Calpurnius matches *insignis familias* for Piso—and then in terms of their standing with the people of Rome: *decora rumore vulgi celebrabantur* for Calpurnius matches “claro apud vulgum rumore erat per virtutem” for Piso. But thereafter the representations diverge significantly, for Piso’s reputation with the plebs can be expanded upon by a narration of his behavior in public and private life. All that can be said of his son

is *nihil ausus*, “he had ventured no rash act.” Indeed, Calpurnius’s lack of action is juxtaposed with the name of his father—“filius Gai Pisonis, nihil ausus”—which encourages us to consider not only his father’s actions in the passage just quoted, but also his daring attempt at an imperial coup, narrated in the subsequent chapters of *Annals* 15.

The absence of action from Calpurnius underscores how hypothetical his threat to empire is, in contrast to the threat posed by his father five years before. That is, his historical significance is *virtual*; only when he is perceived as a “what if” does killing him seem politically expedient. It is telling that Tacitus here represents the Romans’ tendency to speculate in this manner as a sign of the ongoing political instability in a state now facing its fourth emperor in just over a year.

The Pisones of the *Histories*, when taken together in this way, underscore the curious role of the past in both configuring them as imperial contenders and, at the same time, presenting them as extraordinarily passive, even paralyzed, in relation to political action. And since Tacitus’s historical works can be read in reverse order, these paralyzed, later Pisones overshadow their more active predecessors when we turn to the *Annals*. As we’ve already seen, the C. Piso who heads a conspiracy against Nero is prominent enough to ensure his son’s death under the Flavian regime five years later; he is also prominent by virtue of his ancestry—and by virtue of the length and elaboration of Tacitus’s narrative at *Annals* 15. Yet if we look in more detail at that narrative, we find there, too, a Piso who seems to be constituted by the imperial desires and aspirations of others. Right after the character sketch that I quoted earlier, Tacitus begins his account of the conspiracy thus: “The beginning of this conspiracy did not spring from Piso’s own desire, but neither can I easily recall who was the first author, by whose initiative was the movement created in which so many men participated,” “initium coniurationi non a cupidine ipsius fuit: nec tamen facile memoraverim quis primus auctor, cuius instinctu concitum sit quod tam multi sumpserunt” (*Ann.* 15.49.1).

Even in the absence of a *primus auctor*, Piso fails to stand forth as the most prominent actor in the plot,¹⁵ since he is upstaged by the senator Flavius Scaevinus. Indeed, Piso’s reluctance to seize an opportunity just as the conspiracy is being unmasked points up just how small a part he has

15 Woodman 1993 analyzes the episode in terms of acting and role play. See also the remarks of Haynes 2003.188 n. 31.

played¹⁶ and how similar his refusal to act is to that of L. Piso, the proconsul of Asia, the last Piso in the extant *Histories*. Like this later Piso, the Neronian conspirator is exhorted to make an appeal to the soldiers and populace, but is represented as impassive and inclined to seclusion: “Unmoved by these words, he spent a short time in public, then withdrew in private to his house and strengthened his spirit to face the end,” “*immotus his et paululum in publico versatus, post domi secretus, animum adversum suprema firmabat*” (*Ann.* 15.59.7).

The verbal echoes are hardly extraordinary: L. Piso’s “*nihil ad ea moto Pisone*” and *clausus intra domum* matches C. Piso’s *immotus his* and *post domi secretus*. What the similarity between the Neronian Piso and his successors in the *Histories* does effect, however, is a rethinking of the chain of significance that led to their deaths. If Galerianus, for example, dies not because of his own actions but because of the memory of his father’s bid for empire, how does that causality survive the inactivity of the father when the same historian comes to narrate that earlier bid for empire?

The Neronian Piso, then, seems as much a victim of contemporary speculation as does his son Calpurnius Galerianus and his son’s cousin L. Piso. Like them, he meets his fate because other Romans around him asked the question: “What if Piso became emperor?” But there are differences: the Romans speculating about C. Piso are key military and senatorial figures, and Piso himself participates in the speculation. Nevertheless, the story of the Pisonian conspiracy could provoke a different sort of speculation: not “What if Piso became emperor?” but “What if certain Romans in A.D. 65 had not asked that ‘what if’ question?”

If there is a Pisonian dynasty, the conspirator of A.D. 65 does not stand as its forefather, despite his prominence in the narrative of the *Annals*; another Piso dominates the early books and takes much more initiative in his challenge to the Julio-Claudians. Like C. Piso, this Piso is introduced with a character sketch and a genealogy (*Ann.* 2.43.2–3):

Tiberius put in charge of Syria Gnaeus Piso, a man violent by temperament and unaccustomed to give way to people, with inbred wildness that he got from his father Piso, who during the civil war, had with eager activity helped

16 Piso does participate in the conspirators’ discussion in 15.52 when he expresses his conviction that the assassination of Nero must take place in Rome, and in public.

the Pompeians as they recovered their forces in Africa. Then following Brutus and Cassius, after his request to return to Italy had been granted, he refused to pursue a political career until he was solicited by Augustus to accept a consulate from him. But Cn. Piso was inspired not just by his father's spirit but by the nobility and wealth of his wife Plancina; he would barely give precedence to Tiberius, and looked down on the sons of Tiberius as far beneath him.

praefeceratque Cn. Pisonem, ingenio violentum et obsequii ignarum, insita ferocia a patre Pisone qui civili bello resurgentis in Africa partis acerrimo ministerio adversus Caesarem iuvit, mox Brutum et Cassium secutus concesso reditu petitione honorum abstinuit, donec ultro ambiretur delatum ab Augusto consulatum accipere. sed praeter paternos spiritus uxoris quoque Plancinae nobilitate et opibus accendebatur; vix Tiberio concedere, liberos eius ut multum infra despectare.

Whereas the Neronian Piso's genealogy is illustrious but vague (prosopographers have failed to identify his paternity),¹⁷ Cn. Piso's father dominates the character sketch almost to the detriment of his son. Indeed, if the fate of Pisones in Tacitus is always to remind the reader or onlooker of a more active predecessor, this Piso seems initially to be no exception.¹⁸ But the ensuing narrative dispels that initial appearance, as Piso proceeds on his own initiative—or perhaps at the bidding of the emperor Tiberius—to pursue a feud with Tiberius's son Germanicus (*Ann.* 2.55–61, 69–70) and after Germanicus's death, to attempt to regain control of the province of Syria (*Ann.* 2.75.2–81).¹⁹

It is in this latter episode that the difference between Piso's bid

17 See the remarks of Syme 1960.19–20.

18 The role of Piso in relation to both Tiberius and Germanicus has been perceptively analyzed by Pelling 1993.

19 Goodyear 1981.407–08 argues that Piso had probably been removed from office, but the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* has Piso leaving Syria of his own accord (ll. 47–49, translation available in Griffin 1997); see also the remarks of Woodman and Martin 1996.147.

for provincial power and his successors' attempts on the principate come out with the greatest force. Like the other Pisones, Gnaeus is advised on what course of action to take, but his response to this advice is a furious outburst of activity: he writes to Tiberius, sends Domitius Celer ahead to Syria, organizes deserters and camp-followers into the form of a legion, intercepts recruits bound for Syria, and attempts to enlist the aid of Cilician kings (*Ann.* 2.78). His eager activity recalls the characteristics of his father that we were told he has inherited; the "inbred wildness" (*insita ferocia*) mentioned at 2.43.2 is echoed by Piso's reaction to advice as "ready for wild actions" (*promptus ferocibus*) at 2.78.1. Indeed, the civil war background against which his father's activities were set serves as a way of characterizing Piso's attack on Syria; the new governor, Sentius, warns him "not to make an attempt on the province by war" (*ne provinciam bello temptet*, 2.79.2), and advises his legions that "this is an armed attack on the state" (*rem publicam armis peti*, 2.79.3).²⁰

In the confrontation between Piso's army and the Syrian legions, we see how Piso's self-representation as commander veers from Caesarian to Pisonian. His first appellation is "the legate of Caesar," but he goes on to recall how the Syrian troops called him "father" ("Pisonem ab ipsis parentem quondam appellatum," 2.80.2), an appellation gained through corruption of the soldiers, according to Tacitus's earlier narration (2.55.5).²¹ Even after the Syrian legions put Piso's scratch army to flight, he continues to exhort individual soldiers to come over to his side by a combination of self-display and attempted bribery; one standard bearer defects to his side, an indication of how dangerous Piso still is to the new governor (2.81.1–2). Indeed, his unwavering determination to win over the legions in this manner could be seen as one of the qualities of good generalship that made Piso a force to be contended with.²²

Cn. Piso, then, comes across as the member of his clan whose disruption of the state presents the most serious threat to the status quo.

20 The *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* refers to Piso's actions as civil war (ll. 45–47), and gives an account of how his attempts to win over the soldiers resulted in some being called "Pisonians" and some "Caesarians" (ll. 55–56). This clearly alludes to the memory of the "Pompeian" party in the civil wars.

21 Goodyear 1981.363 comments: "Old and respectable precedent existed for honorific application of *parens*, *pater*, *patronus* to generals and others. . . . But Piso had not acquired the appellation respectably and was rash to have acquired it at all."

22 The comments of Rosenstein 1990.114–22 are particularly apposite here.

Nevertheless, it is not so clear-cut a threat to the emperor as is C. Piso's conspiracy in A.D. 65. That is to say, the later conspiracy directly poses the question: "What if Piso became emperor?,"²³ whereas the earlier attempted coup poses a different question altogether: "What if Piso regained the governorship of Syria?" To speculate from Piso's acquisition of Syria to any sort of sustained confrontation or compromise with the emperor Tiberius would require the introduction of a whole series of further contingencies and speculations.

Furthermore, while all the later Pisones pose a threat to the emperor by attempting, or being suspected of attempting, to replace him—they appear as "alternative emperors"—Cn. Piso's disruption to the state is seen as a manifestation of his hereditary reluctance to acknowledge and obey superiors. In other words, Cn. Piso and other senators of the Tiberian period display to a greater or lesser extent a reluctance or inability to adjust their "republican" senatorial principles to life under a *princeps*.²⁴ If we return to Cn. Piso's character sketch, for example, we see that his attitude to Tiberius's status is grudging, while he considers his own status to be above that of Drusus and Germanicus. In the first book of the *Annals*, this attitude is "translated" into the position he adopts in the senate in relation to the *princeps*: his pointed remark to Tiberius about the influence he holds over senatorial votes is glossed by Tacitus as "vestiges of dying liberty" (*vestigia morientis libertatis*, 1.74.5). Nonetheless, we cannot see Piso's disruption of the state simply as that of a violent republican, in the first place because Tacitus repeatedly suggests that Piso's early actions in Syria were carried out at the behest of the emperor Tiberius.²⁵

More significant than any of Piso's actions, however, is his appearance in the speculative talk (*sermones*) of others, an appearance that makes him look very like some of the Pisones in the *Histories*. Below is the very first mention of Piso in the *Annals*, in a discussion about suitable candidates for the role of emperor (*Ann.* 1.13.2–3):

23 As Rhiannon Ash reminds me, Cn. Piso does possess one attribute that makes him a more serious contender than C. Piso for empire: a wife (Plancina) and sons, essential for establishing a dynasty. See the reference to Plancina's influence in Piso's character sketch at *Ann.* 2.43.3, quoted above. Tacitus gives Plancina a prominent role in the narrative, perhaps implying her potential as an alternative to Livia or Agrippina.

24 Sinclair 1995.184, for example, sees Piso as one example of "the 'old,' republican-spirited aristocracy"; cf. p. 169.

25 See the discussion of Pelling 1993.

Augustus, in one of his last conversations when he was considering who was capable of taking over the place of *princeps* but would refuse, or who would want to but would be unequal to the task, or who would be able and willing, said that Manius Lepidus was capable but would refuse, that Asinius Gallus was eager but not up to it, and that Lucius Arruntius was not unworthy, and if the chance were offered he would take the risk. There is complete agreement about the first two; some sources have replaced Arruntius with Gnaeus Piso.

Augustus supremis sermonibus cum tractaret quinam adipisci principem locum suffecturi abnuerent aut inpaes vellent vel idem possent cuperentque, M'. Lepidum dixerat capacem sed aspernantem, Gallum Asinium avidum et minorem, L. Arruntium non indignum et si casus daretur ausurum. de prioribus consentitur, pro Arruntio quidam Cn. Pisonem tradidere.

This, the first appearance of Piso in the text, without any other context, is striking; the “footnote” in which he suddenly replaces L. Arruntius might be said to draw attention to him as the imperial usurper par excellence.²⁶ And the “character sketch” to which he suddenly accedes—“not unworthy and prepared to take the risk if the chance is offered”²⁷—perfectly sums up his actions in the final chapters of Book 2. But beyond its significance for the specific story of Cn. Piso, this first occurrence of a Pisonian name in the earliest period of the principate as recorded by Tacitus sets up the chain of Pisones who can be read across the regimes as an alternative empire.

26 We could see a parallel between the narrator's abrupt introduction of Piso as imperial pretender at this point in the *Annals* and Galba's sudden nomination of Piso Licinianus rather than Otho at *Histories* 1.14, discussed above. Arruntius lasts longer than Cn. Piso; his suicide is recorded at *Ann.* 6.48. In fact, all three candidates named by Augustus at *Ann.* 1.13 die in the course of Book 6 (Lepidus 6.27, Asinius Gallus 6.48), while Piso dies in Book 3.

27 This, of course, resonates ironically with the penultimate Piso, Calpurnius Galerianus, whose character is summed up as *nihil ausus* (*Hist.* 4.11.2).

HISTORY IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

If to understand is to consider what might have been possible . . . and if what was possible can at best be assessed but, since it did not occur, not be known . . . success in History . . . consists in understanding more and knowing less.

Geoffrey Hawthorn

I remarked above that Tacitus at *Histories* 4.11 seems to associate speculation about alternative emperors with political instability, though it would be unfair to elevate this comment to a generalization. If we wanted, we could normalize this sort of speculation about alternatives by situating it in the Roman tradition of *suasoriae*, speeches of persuasion offered to historical or mythical figures. Closer examination of this practice, however, throws up various interesting questions about how we may read the Pisonian virtual history in relation to the politics of the Tacitean text. Declamations like *suasoriae* and *controversiae* have usually been associated with the Augustan age and beyond, and with “a preoccupation with the fantastic” (Sussman 1978.5) that may or may not be associated with alienation from political life.²⁸ The most often cited example of a *suasoria* is from the elder Seneca’s collection and concerns the question of whether Cicero should give up his *Philippics* to Antony in exchange for his life.²⁹ Because the speaker in a *suasoria* engages in dialogue with a figure from the past, what he engages in bears a close relationship to what we would call “virtual history,” but with some important differences. Like the virtual historian, the *suasor* deals with counterfactuals;³⁰ he poses the question: “What if Cicero had been given the choice to recant his *Philippics*?” Unlike the historian,

28 See also Tacitus’s explicit remarks about *suasoriae* in the *Dialogus de Oratoribus* as “leviores et minus prudentiae exigentes,” “rather frivolous and requiring little forethought” (*Dial.* 35.4). Gunderson 2003a.12 n. 57 points out that this remark “is itself part of a speech about rhetoric.”

29 See the interesting suggestion of Kaster 1998.262–63 that declamatory preoccupation with Cicero’s final hours mirrors the status of the declaimers themselves: “Brilliant yet utterly impotent orators . . . unable to work their will upon a political world in which speech had been shoved to the margins.” By contrast, the analyses of both Bloomer 1997 and Gunderson 2003a seek in different ways to reconstitute the political place of declamation.

30 On the influence of declamation upon Livy’s counterfactual digression on Alexander, see Oakley 2005.188–89.

the *suasor* inserts himself into the historical scene and occupies a particular position with regard to his interlocutor: he *persuades*. If this is history in the subjunctive mode, it is jussive rather than potential.

This imagined scene in which the *suasor*’s speech directly impacts upon an imagined historical outcome works against some scholars’ glib assumptions that the *suasoria* has nothing to do with political action in real life. As Erik Gunderson remarks (2003a.110): “The rhetoric of the self has as its training ground this world of fictional opportunities beyond which beckon virtual, potential selves.” If we glance back at the many Pisones in Tacitus, we find that the role of the *suasor* is frequently present, often even overshadowing the Piso to whom advice is given.³¹ In the second place, the insertion of the *suasor* into a situation in the past—invariably a “crisis situation” (Sussman 1978.11)—from which he speaks in an attempt to change history,³² charges the role of the virtual historian with greater urgency. Like the declaimers of the Roman principate, virtual or counterfactual historians in the modern world are often seen as fantastic idlers, producers of so much *Geschichtswissenschaft*.³³ This scorn from modern critics stems from a concern that we might lose sight of the most important feature of history: that it is, in Aristotle’s terms, an account of what actually happened rather than of the kind of thing that might happen.³⁴

Regard for the actuality of the past as lived experience and piety towards those who experienced the past are not the only motivations for those who criticize virtual historians. For at the same time as virtual history is castigated as pointless frivolity, it is also seen as promoting politically dangerous points of view:³⁵ first, by suggesting that individuals and their

31 See, for example, my discussion of L. Piso at *Histories* 4.49, above.

32 That this description perfectly describes the apostrophes of the poet Lucan in his poem of civil war should surprise nobody.

33 E. P. Thomson, quoted by most writers on the subject: Ferguson 1997, Morley 2000, Morrello 2002, Hunt 2004, Roberts 2004 (in periphrasis).

34 *Poetics* 1451b: τὸν μὲν τὰ γινόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. Aristotle here, of course, is making a distinction between history and poetry, but his terms fit the distinction between actual and virtual history perfectly.

35 One could compare Tacitus’s remarks about the tendency of the Romans to speculate about alternative empires as a similar conflation of the frivolous and the politically dangerous: “In a city still unsettled and *welcoming talk of revolution*, there were still men who would be inclined to *spread empty rumors* about him seeking the principate” (*Hist.* 4.11.2; see above p. 285).

actions are not affected in any way by social, economic, or technological factors;³⁶ secondly, by granting undue importance to the role of chance in human affairs. In response, many defenders of virtual history attack what they see as the overly determinist view of the historical process implicit in these accusations.³⁷ In addition, they claim that virtual history *does*, in fact, show regard for the actuality of the past, precisely by emphasizing the alternative paths that any course of events might have taken. "Unreal constructions must still remain as an integral part of science, even if they do not go beyond an uncertain probability, for they offer the only means of escaping the *retrospective illusion of fatality*."³⁸

Putting the ancient *suasoriae* alongside modern virtual history in this way, furthermore, opens up a crucial difference between the two. For the accusations leveled against virtual historians are kept in different temporal spheres: they are frivolous with regard to the past, but their political aspirations are criticized with respect to the impact they may have on the future. The accusation that virtual historians ignore social history, for example, simultaneously positions them as dilettantes and as heralds of a future in which the ignoring of social history spills over into a neglect of social factors in political planning. Similarly, declaimers have traditionally been seen as escaping into a fantasy past because of their impotence in the present. A "harder" version of this interpretation is that the escape into declamation marks the ruling class's neglect of their political responsibility: declamation is not the symptom but the cause of political impotence. In either instance, the position of the *suasor* is one of frivolity towards the present and future; his political aspirations are located in the past. Both positions are caricatures to some extent (indeed, my reference to "accusations" above indicates that these are rhetorically formulated positions—perhaps even *declamatory* ones), but their mirror imaging is nevertheless suggestive.

36 Hunt 2004, reviewing Roberts 2004, for example, refers to "a ragged bunch of rightwing historians"; "implicit in [virtual history] is the contention that social structures and economic conditions do not matter. Man is, we are told, a creature free of almost all historical constraints." See also the responses to Hunt's article in *The Guardian*, 10th April 2004. Nevertheless, Morley 2000 explores the question of technological development through virtual history. Ferguson 1997 usefully examines the range of political and philosophical premises on which the practice of virtual history might be grounded.

37 Roberts 2004 counters specifically Marxist attacks on speculative history.

38 Aron 1961.183. See also the discussion of Ricoeur 2005.376–82.

When is speculating about alternative empires a frivolous activity, and when does it constitute a serious political discourse?³⁹ What is the difference, for example, between the Romans of *Histories* 4.11 speculating about Calpurnius Galerianus and Augustus in *Annals* 1.13 speculating about all sorts of possible successors? Does it simply, boringly, come down to the difference between the emperor who can act upon his speculations and the Roman subjects, who cannot? To this last question I would be inclined to say that it does not, since the speculations, exhortations, and risks of, say, Vespasian's *suasores* on his attempt at power do not seem structurally different from those of less successful contenders for the principate.⁴⁰

The chapter in which Augustus speculates about the succession, moreover, raises the question of the level at which we situate the analogy between the *suasoria* and virtual history. There is, strictly speaking, no act of persuasion taking place in *Annals* 1.13,⁴¹ though the verb used of Augustus's discourse (*tractare*) is a common one for "treating" a subject in declamation.⁴² Do we imagine Augustus's speculation about the (potential) future as a form of virtual history? This seems to press the limits of the concept of the counterfactual to a point beyond which it holds much force, since the whole point of virtual history is to imagine a past that *did not* happen. Or do we imagine that Augustus's speculation on potential successors is

39 Gunderson 2003a.6 refers to "a zone of intellectual engagement where serious questions are elaborated in a pointedly frivolous context."

40 Vespasian's reflections on his chances, Mucianus's speech of encouragement, and the initial declaration of Vespasian as emperor are given in *Histories* 2.74–81. Morgan 1994c reads chapters 74–75 as a consideration of alternatives that reflects on character, and argues against seeing this as influenced by *suasoriae* and therefore superficial. One difference between speculations about Vespasian and those about, say, Calpurnius Galerianus depends upon the degree of military support enjoyed by each; but control of the military is rarely so clear-cut as in these two examples.

41 This, of course, highlights the problem of the *suasoria* more generally: does one define an "act of persuasion" in terms of the *suasor* or of the addressee? What if they are one and the same?

42 For example, in Elder Seneca *Suas.* 2.16: "Potamon, cum suasoriam de trecentis diceret, tractabat," "When he started to present a *suasoria* about the 300, he treated the subject of Potamos." See, also, Tacitus *Dialogus* 35.4: "duo genera materiarum apud rhetoras tractantur, suasoriae et controversiae," "Two types of material are treated by rhetoricians: *suasoriae* and *controversiae*."

itself an event of virtual history?⁴³ That is, do we see this episode itself as reflecting on the question: "What if Augustus had considered successors outside his immediate family?"⁴⁴ The existence of variant versions of the list of successors, pointed to by Tacitus's "footnote" sentence, could indicate differing historiographical sources but could also hint at the divergence of contingencies marked by virtual history.⁴⁵

By any reading, *Annals* 1.13 is a fascinating passage with considerable significance for what follows. In the light of the links between *sua-soriae* and virtual history that I have sketched above, it offers a view of the possible parallel strands of history that could have emerged in the aftermath of Augustus's death. The Julio-Claudian dynasty is not, from this perspective, determined in advance. But what is the political nature of these parallel strands? I have resisted putting the virtual dynasty of the Pisones alongside the other alternative history that runs in parallel to Tacitus's narrative and that, at points, threatens to become actuality: the history of republican Rome.⁴⁶ Speculation about the restoration of the republic does not usually need to be defended by Tacitus or his readers as a serious political activity; setting it alongside the supposedly frivolous positing of alternative empires brings the politics of both types of virtual history into focus.

43 Notice that Goodyear's first question about this episode is: "(i) are these *supremi sermones* credible in themselves?" (1972.181).

44 A question implicitly posed by Galba, too, in his adoption speech: "But Augustus looked for a successor in his family, I look for one in the state," "sed Augustus in domo successorem quaesivit, ego in re publica" (*Hist.* 1.15.2). Compare Tiberius's rejection of non Julio-Claudian successors at *Ann.* 4.46.

45 Suerbaum 1997.37 playfully refers to "historia in bivio."

46 The lost Tacitean narrative of Caligula's assassination and the brief senatorial attempt to restore the republic would be very interesting in this regard. Rhiannon Ash points out to me that lacunae in ancient texts invite (highly respectable) exercises in speculative history. Galba briefly gestures towards an improbable restoration of the republic by himself (*Hist.* 1.16.1).

VIRTUAL POLITICS

On the market today, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . . Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real. Just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as a reality without being one.

Slavoj Žižek⁴⁷

Up to this point, I have considered the potential politics of *suasoriae* and virtual history in relation to the role of the “speaker”; declamatory virtual history enjoins upon the speaker actual participation in the alternative past that they construct through the jussive subjunctive. But now I would like to turn to the form of these alternative pasts in historical narrative, after which I will return to the question of the politics of virtual history in general, and of the history of the Pisonian dynasty in particular.

Even if we did not have Livy's famous counterfactual excursus on a Roman war with Alexander, we would probably be able to speculate that the appropriate form for representing alternative pasts would be the digression. This mimetically replicates the split of causally linked events into separate contingencies that may or may not collide again further down the line.⁴⁸ Not all digressions have to be about alternative realities—S. P. Oakley neatly summarizes their content as “matters of interest that were not fitted easily into a chronological narrative”⁴⁹—but alternative reality might be said to fit well with the form of the digression. Indeed, Ruth Morello's recent persuasive analysis of Livy 9.17–19 reads the digression precisely as a divergence and reconvergence (2002.84):⁵⁰ “The counterfactual mode

47 Compare Eco 1986.6–7 on “history parks” in the US, though a more provocative analysis is offered by Bann 1995.

48 For causation and chance, see Morley 2000; on chaos theory, Liveley 2002.

49 Oakley 2005.184. For Tacitus's negotiation of content and chronology, see Ginsburg 1981.

50 Though she also points to the relevance of digression to Livy's historical project both generally and in relation to the second pentad. See, also, Suerbaum 1997.41–42.

and the first-person singular give way by the end of the digression to first-person plural exhortation and contemporary 'reality.'" The point I want to make here about this form is not so much its relation to actual or counterfactual history but its relation to the politics of that history and the political position of the historian. When Livy says he "diverges from the order of events more than is proper" ("plus iusto ab rerum ordine declinarem," 9.17.1), what range of referents do we decide to use for *rerum ordine*? The Lucretian language (as well as the context of virtual history in which this is explicitly situated) encourages us to read this as "reality": things that happened in an order of causality, properly represented in narrative.⁵¹

The "order of events" thus becomes not only "reality" but also "narrative"; but what if we offer a more overtly political reading of this phrase? As Morello points out (2002.67), this point in Livy's digression echoes the Preface to the *ab Urbe Condita*, where Livy's penchant for ancient history is configured as an escape from the more depressing contemporary scene. It is impossible to read the prefatory comments as having no bearing on the political world within which Livy was writing; so, too, his digression into an alternative past of Roman-Macedonian warfare has been seen as having significance beyond the temporal scope of Book 9.⁵² In this context, *rerum ordine* can seem to refer to political *rank* as well as historical reality.

Tacitus, too, makes political points through the form of the digression, most notably in his famous excursus on the point of history writing at *Annals* 4.32–33.⁵³ One implicit question raised not only in that digression but in his preface to the *Annals* as a whole is, as John Moles puts it (1998.4.2): "If whole histories are 'digressions,' from what do they digress? Is the overriding narrative path that of monarchical history? Was the Republic just a digression, albeit a very extensive one, within the history of monarchy?" What is peculiar about Tacitus's "virtual history" of the Pisonian dynasty is that he eschews the form of a digression and chooses instead

51 Yet, of course, for Lucretius, reality is created by the divergence from order, the *clinamen*.

52 Morello 2002.81: "Livy . . . in celebrating the Roman people, pointedly downplays the importance of kingly individuals."

53 See Moles 1998.4.1: "The passage's status as digression must also be brought into relation with the 'free digressiveness' enjoyed by Republican historians. What sense does it make that the concept of 'free digressiveness' (*libero egressu*) is applied to whole histories, whereas Tacitus apologises within a 'digression' (a passage that is itself recognisably an *egressus*) for the apparent triviality and restrictedness of the subject-matter of his historical narrative?"

to embed his alternative past into his "actual history," the narrative of the Julio-Claudians and subsequent emperors. What are the politics of *this* form of virtual history?

What virtual history aims to present us with is "plausible worlds" (the title of Hawthorn 1991) as well as "possible worlds." While virtual historians are sometimes vilified for creating not "what if" history but "if only" history, they continue to ground their speculations (or wishful thinking) in notions of plausibility and causality. Indeed, one "rule" that has been offered for virtual historians calls on a harder form of historicism to authorize their imaginings: "We should consider as plausible or probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered.*"⁵⁴ Cicero's option of giving up the *Philippics* is disqualified in advance. But this qualification can also be related back to the phenomenon of Tacitus's Pisonian dynasty in order to pose the question: "If we read this as an 'embedded' alternative past, what does it tell us about the politics of the Tacitean text?" For as I argue above, it is far from clear-cut whether the alternatives offered by some Pisones constitute republican or monarchical alternatives. How do they fit (or not fit) with the explicit appeal to a republican past in the form of digressions?

The distinction that I have opened up between plausible and possible might be mapped in various ways onto Tacitus's thinking about republican and monarchical forms of government. Does he, for example, represent republicanism as possible but not plausible in the history he narrates? Cn. Piso, the "Augustus" of the Pisonian dynasty, and marked out (possibly) by Augustus himself as a potential alternative emperor, is rooted in republican traditions; his fate in *Annals* 1–3 is often seen as a representation of the fate of the republic and of republicans in the new regime.⁵⁵ But to what extent is Piso's attempted coup a representation of how "republican" qualities are already being adapted to the new regime? Augustus, after all, also had "impeccably republican antecedents" (Pelling 1993.84) as well as a family history of discord and civil war. And the way in which the Pisonian dynasty is embedded in the narrative of the emperors from A.D. 14 onwards, not separated out into a formal digression along the lines of Livy's Alexander

54 Ferguson 1997.86 (emphasis in original), trenchantly challenged by Morley 2000.204–05.

55 See, for example, Pelling's conclusion (1993.84): "The times suit [Sejanus], not the likes of Piso."

excursus, could be read as a comment on the difficulties of disentangling republican from imperial positions in politics or history.

One aspect of the historical process that virtual history highlights is the question of what features of past events we consider to be “essential” and what “incidental” (to use Michael Oakeshott’s terms [1933.128]): the “malignant property,” as Žižek terms it. If we consider the Pisonian dynasty to be an alternative empire, do we not constitute “principate” as the necessary element in the history of Rome after Augustus? The principate continues, while the only alternatives offered are precisely who will fill the role of *princeps* (remember Piso Licinianus’s assumption that Caesar is a “name,” *Hist.* 1.29.2). More interestingly, Žižek’s formulation of virtual reality focuses on the removal of the “substance” of reality from the experience of reality as such; we can see how this works in relation to virtual history, which takes on the form and methodology of history, and which, like history, is aimed at an understanding of the past. This raises further questions in relation to the politics of the Pisonian narrative: rather than understanding the substance of principate as integral to principate itself, and as readily transferred to an alternate dynasty,⁵⁶ can we instead locate the substance of principate, paradoxically, in the specificity of Julio-Claudian rule? In other words, in the shift from the “actual” Julio-Claudian principate to a “virtual” Pisonian principate, do we abandon the substance of politics? And (how) can one experience virtual empire?⁵⁷

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56 See, for example, the words of Marcellus at *Histories* 4.8.2: “He remembered the time in which he was born, and what type of state their fathers and grandfathers had set up; he could admire the ancient past, he followed the present; he prayed for good emperors but put up with whoever ruled,” “se meminisse temporum quibus natus sit, quam civitatis formam patres avique instituerint; ulteriora mirari, praesentia sequi; bonos imperatores voto expetere, qualiscumque tolerare.”

57 I am very grateful to Rhiannon Ash and to the anonymous *Arethusa* reader for their insightful comments that have greatly helped me in rethinking some of the premises of this essay. I am also grateful to Stephen Oakley for making available to me the page proofs of his commentary on Livy Book 9.