

COMMISSURA IN TACITUS, HISTORIES 1

It is not enough, says Quintilian (7.10.16), to assemble the various parts of a speech. The orator must arrange his points in the natural and logical order for his purposes, and he must unify the different sections so skilfully that no join will show ('ne commissura perluceat'), producing a single body instead of assorted limbs. If we define as *commissura* (or *transitus*) the rhetorical device which welds together different themes or chapters with an associative link in word or thought (sometimes matching like with like, more frequently depending on antithesis), Tacitus already had this lesson by heart when he wrote the *Germania*.¹ That he exploited the same technique in his major works, concentrating on his transitions as hard as would Macaulay on his,² appears not to have been noticed, and certainly has not received systematic study.

In the *Germania*, of course, Tacitus had to combine discrete blocks of information, on tribal customs and on tribes, and if he was to introduce any flow into his narrative, he had little choice but to adopt a technique which – as Steidle has demonstrated – Suetonius would exploit to hold together the material he had decided to arrange *per species*.³ The *Histories* and the *Annals*, by contrast, have each a story line and a chronological thread so strong that Tacitus can play off this situation with a style that is markedly discontinuous, to all appearances jagged and abrupt. As a result, familiarity with the canons of classical Latin prose will not induce us to look for special effects in passages where he is willing to provide an overt, formal connection – as he does at the start of some two-thirds of the chapters in *Histories* 1.⁴ Nor are we surprised that he shunned one link dear to his predecessors, the formula 'dum haec...geruntur', or that he reduced vastly the frequency of another, the ablative absolute.⁵ And finally, we may forget that chapter divisions are a Renaissance convention, and imagine that the breaks they mark are more pronounced than Tacitus thought them to be, a possibility hinted at by the cases where alliteration runs across the supposed division.⁶

¹ See especially A. Gunz, *Die deklamatorische Rhetorik in der Germania des Tacitus* (Diss., Lausanne, 1934), pp. 62–7; E. Kraggerud, 'Verknüpfung in Tacitus' *Germania*', *SO* 47 (1972), 7–35.

² Cf. J. Clive, *Not by Fact Alone* (Boston, 1991), pp. 20–1, 67, 71, 304.

³ W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie*² (Munich, 1963), pp. 54–8 and 80–7.

⁴ Of the 89 transitions in *Histories* 1, I leave out of account the four set within speeches (15/16; 29/30; 37/38; 83/84); nor is there need to comment on 36/37 (save for its alliteration: below, n. 6) and 84/85. Of the remaining 83 transitions less than 30 lack an obvious, formal connection. For the text I have used the Teubner edition by H. Heubner (Stuttgart, 1978), and all Tacitean references hereafter are to the *Histories* unless stated otherwise.

⁵ As seems to have been remarked first by J. Cousin, *REL* 29 (1951), 230, Tacitus uses 'dum haec...geruntur' only twice, and both examples are in the *Histories* (2.87.1; 3.78.1). For his use of the ablative absolute see J.-P. Chausserie-Laprée, *L'Expression narrative chez les historiens latins* (Paris, 1969), pp. 186–7, and below, n. 8.

⁶ In *Histories* 1 the break at the start of chapter 60 seems unnecessary (only at *Agr.* 8.1 does *praeerat* obviously begin a chapter), and that at the start of 81 may be so. As for alliteration, a topic on which I cannot subscribe to the extreme scepticism of F. R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus, vol. I: Annals 1.1–54* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 336–41, note especially the transitions at chapters 11/12 (discussed below, p. 280), 12/13 ('praemia peccaretur./potentia principatus'), and 66/67 (quoted below, p. 287). Also interesting, though not as compelling, are the transitions at chapters 36/37 and 51/52.

Nonetheless, close examination will show that Tacitus regularly links his chapters in a subtle and complex manner, at times employing language chosen seemingly to fit literary rather than historical purposes. It follows that any failure to appreciate the ways in which he sews together his narrative can weaken our grip on his train of thought, our understanding of the precise point he is making, and our ability to draw legitimate conclusions from his account.⁷ To pursue the subject through either of the major works would produce a study of inordinate length and invincible tedium, and so this discussion is limited primarily to *Histories* 1. The tight focus will disappoint those who seek a glaring example of the triumph of literary considerations over the historical, since recognition of the manner in which *commissura* functions within this book yields no such instance, serving at best to clarify problems that have been debated for years. But we need to establish the extent to which Tacitus employed the technique and the patterns he followed inside a single book before we start looking for it elsewhere, and though *Histories* 1 is the book whose artistry has been investigated most assiduously, there is no mention of *commissura* in the many analyses of its construction.

It will be as well to observe at the start that *commissura* (in whatever form) is not utilized to tie together every single chapter, but nor is there one obvious pattern to explain its employment or the degree to which it is elaborated. It seems obvious that four chapters beginning with an ablative absolute which summarizes what has gone before (47, 61, 77, 79) would not require a formal link or any larger connections.⁸ Likewise, *commissura* is not seen in chapters opening with a precise calendar date (18, 27, 52, 90; cf. 56.2),⁹ or in two of the three cases where the adjective 'proximus' appears in the first sentence (20, 57, 65), suggesting that straightforward proximity needs no more development than does an exact progression in time.¹⁰ Yet the device usually shows up in a chapter that starts with less precise temporal expressions, like 'inde' or 'deinde', with adverbs such as 'interim', or with an ordinary conjunction, be it 'et' or 'nec', 'sed' or 'tamen'. At a more general level, one would not expect elaborate linkages in a string of chapters describing a single, fast-moving set of events, but it is in just such a context – as we shall see (below, p. 284) – that Tacitus deploys a truly complex example of the technique. And most striking of all, at first sight anyway, Tacitus does not forsake *commissura* entirely because there is a natural break in the narrative, whether or not rounded out by a *sententia* requiring a momentary pause for the audience to appreciate its bite.¹¹

⁷ Thus the *commissura* at 2.9/10 is obvious (cf. G. E. F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' 'Histories' I and II* (Oxford, 1979), p. 173), whereas that at 2.59/60 has caused no little perplexity (see *CP* 86 (1991), 138–43).

⁸ These ablative absolutes (styled 'de reprise' by Chausserie-Laprée, op. cit., p. 109) cannot well be considered in isolation, since Tacitus uses an instrumental ablative to similar effect in three more chapters (66, 75, 78), and in a fourth (24) a dative construction reinforced by *iam*. However, the ablative absolutes which occur at the start of chapters 15, 31, 41, 58 and 87 carry the action one step further (they are styled 'd'enchaînement' by Chausserie-Laprée, op. cit., p. 120), and in each case *commissura* operates, as we shall see at the appropriate points in the discussion.

⁹ The imprecise date used at 12.1 is best discussed separately, since it involves an elaborate *commissura*: see below, p. 280.

¹⁰ Though *proxima* at 57.1 means next in space (cf. 3.4.1), the adjective functions in exactly the same way as does *proxima* at 20.1, clearly next in time (cf. 4.44.1) rather than next in order of importance (cf. 2.67.1). At 65.1, on the other hand, 'proximum bellum' refers back to a war prior to the time of which Tacitus is talking, and *commissura* is discernible here: see below, n. 18.

¹¹ The breaks are discussed below. The practice of pausing to secure applause was criticized harshly by Quintilian 8.5.14.

Since Tacitus prefers to work through antithesis, it is difficult to adduce simple cases where linkage is achieved by matching like with like. For even when he takes this path, he opts for an association in thought rather than in word, presumably because this is less mechanical and less banal than an explicit pairing of synonyms. So unless we count instances where people, with appropriate variation in the grammatical case, form the connection,¹² there is but one obvious example of word-for-word correspondence: chapter 43 ends with Piso's murder, the last word 'trucidatus', and chapter 44 opens with 'nullam caedem'. Two more cases are similar, however. Chapter 34, on the spreading of rumours by the Othonians, ends with 'volgaverint', and on this follows 'tum vero non populus tantum et imperita plebs'.¹³ And in chapter 81 the mutinous praetorians gatecrash Otho's banquet in the palace and Tacitus describes vividly the panic flight of the civilian guests. An exact antithesis to the overall situation is set up by the first words of chapter 82, 'militum impetus', but it can be argued too that, since the verb denoting the guests' running for cover and the last word in chapter 81 is 'petivere', Tacitus is simultaneously matching synonyms: 'impetus' also conveys speedy movement in a specific direction for a specific purpose.¹⁴ In at least one more instance, finally, Tacitus contrives his effect more subtly, by separating the synonyms. Chapter 24 deals with Otho's ability beforehand to corrupt the guard 'per socordiam praefecti, quem nota pariter et occulta fallebant'. Then comes (25.1) 'sed tum e libertis Onomastum futuro sceleri praefecit'. For all that the 'sed' is resumptive and the 'tum' returns us to the narrative present, 'praefecit' is clearly designed to echo 'praefecti'. Onomastus now assumes a role vis-à-vis Otho similar to that held by the incurious Laco in relation to Galba.¹⁵

As for matching like with like in thought, the clearest examples occur at chapters 21/22 and 35/36. Chapter 21 concludes with Otho's determination that 'acrioris viri esse merito perire' and is followed by a gloss resting on the same idea of mental toughness (22.1): 'non erat Othonis mollis et corpori similis animus'. The same theme recurs at 35/36, but now it is applied to different people, first to Galba ('minantibus intrepidus, adversus blandientes incorruptus'), then to the praetorians ('haud dubiae... mentes'). In chapters 5/6 and 6/7 Tacitus achieves similar effects more economically. The second half of chapter 5 harps on Galba's age and his old-fashioned ways ('senium... olim... veterem... olim'), and the first words of chapter 6

¹² Thus 14/15 ('adoptanti - Galba'); 16/17 ('facto - Pisonem'); 47/48 ('Pisonem... Titum Vinium - Piso... Titus Vinius'); 53/54 ('Lingones - civitas Lingonum'); 67/68 ('Helvetios - illi'); 68/69 ('Vitellii - imperatorem'); and 69/70 ('civitati - in Helvetiis').

¹³ Similarly, having concluded Piso's speech to the praetorians (29-30), Tacitus continues (31.1): 'dilapsis speculatoribus cetera cohors non aspernata contionantem'. This being a condensed way of saying that the *speculatores* rejected Piso's speech and slipped away, whereas the rest of the cohort stayed and listened, the connection with the previous chapter is made through 'contionantem'.

¹⁴ See A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum* (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 577-8 and 1114-16; only one chapter earlier Tacitus has used 'petere' of the praetorians' own headlong rush to the Palace (80.2: 'Palatium petunt'). Compare 57/58, where Tacitus sardonically treats opposites as synonyms: Vitellius' troops act 'instinctu et impetu et avaritia', and the next words are 'igitur laudata militum alacritate Vitellius'.

¹⁵ In Livy this might be subconscious repetition (cf. K. Gries, *CP* 46 (1951), 36-7). To assume as much here would require us to ignore word usage (in the *Historiae* Tacitus favours 'praeponere' over 'praeferere': Gerber and Greef, op. cit., pp. 1166-7 and 1163 respectively), the irony inherent in a freedman's being made *praefectus* of anything, and Tacitus' readiness to separate antonyms too (below, n. 18). Besides, there may be a parallel at 40/41, where the 'Capitolii adspectus' does not deter Galba's attackers (40.2) and we switch to Galba's defenders with 'viso comminus armatorum agmine' (41.1).

pick up the refrain, 'invalidum senem'.¹⁶ Chapter 6 then winds up with the statement that the forces gathered in Rome at the time constituted 'ingens novis rebus materia, ut non in unum aliquem prono favore, ita audenti parata'. Whereupon chapter 7 starts with the simultaneous announcement in the city of the deaths of Clodius Macer and Fonteius Capito, and both men Tacitus goes on to describe in terms indicating that either, had he lived, could have been that *audens*.¹⁷ There is also one clear case where Tacitus shifts the focus slightly, no doubt for *variatio*. Chapter 9 ends with the comment that there was calm in the Balkan provinces, because 'longis spatiis discreti exercitus... nec vitiis nec viribus miscebantur', and chapter 10 passes from difficulties of movement to complete immobility with 'Oriens adhuc immotus'.¹⁸ Finally, the last part of chapter 85 sets up a more complex transition. The subject being a senate meeting called by Otho just before he leaves for the north, Tacitus dwells on the participants' fears about how to act and the general uproar in which they find refuge. On this follows (86.1) 'prodigia insuper terrebant diversis auctoribus volgata'. Whatever we make of 'insuper', the verb manifestly picks up the theme of fear (just as 'volgata' implies a contrast with the *curia*), and if 'diversis auctoribus volgata' denotes reports spread by different people in different parts of the city,¹⁹ this produces an uproar throughout Rome comparable to that prevailing throughout the senate.

If we turn now to cases where the linkage rests on a straightforward verbal antithesis, an illustration of textbook simplicity appears early in *Histories* 2. Having talked of Annius Faustus' condemnation through the efforts of Vibius Crispus, Tacitus declares that 'nec poena criminis, sed ultor displicebat' (2.10.3), and opens the next chapter 'laeta interim Othoni principia belli'. Though there are larger polarities here (e.g. minor verbal feuding in the senate as against major military action in the field), the juxtaposition *displicebat/laeta* is obviously intended to reinforce the formal link in 'interim'. In the first book Tacitus resorts to a similar, if less obvious transition at chapters 87/88. The former details the commanders Otho selects for his campaign against Vitellius' forces, concluding with Licinius Proculus who, 'pravus et callidus, bonos et modestos anteibat'. Tacitus then continues (88.1) 'sepositus per eos

¹⁶ This surely refutes the arguments of K. Wellesley, *ANRW* ii.33, 3 (Berlin, 1991), p. 1655, to replace 'senium' (5.2) with 'saevitiam'. Nor am I convinced of the need for 'a heavy break' at the start of this section (so Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 50), since 'plerisque' is picked up immediately by 'nec deerant'.

¹⁷ M. Fuhrmann, *Philologus* 104 (1960), 257–8, thought the reference to Otho, but E. Koestermann, *Historia* 5 (1956), 227, was closer to the mark, maintaining that the comment is deliberately unspecific.

¹⁸ Chapters 8–11 form a catalogue, strung on a geographical thread running from west to east, from the explicit 'et hic quidem Romae' (8.1; see below, n. 29), through 'Superior exercitus' (9.1) and 'Oriens' (10.1) to 'Aegyptum' (11.1). But in every case Tacitus goes beyond this obvious linkage. Thus chapter 8 ends with 'accipiebant' and the verb in the first sentence of 9 is the antithetical 'spernebat' (displaced from the head of the sentence by 'Superior exercitus'); and chapter 10 concludes with the omens, presaging Vespasian's principate, which 'post fortunam credidimus'; whereupon 11 opens with the province in which the Flavian's *fortuna* was first proclaimed (2.79). Several other chapters are motivated by similar progressions. At 20/21 we pass from unrest among the officers stationed in Rome to Otho, 'cui compositis rebus nulla spes, omne in turbido consilium'; at 25/26 from a *sedition* among the praetorians to a *tabes* infecting 'legionum quoque et auxiliorum motas iam mentes' (a trope Tacitus employs otherwise only at 3.11.1: Gerber and Greef, *op. cit.*, p. 1615); at 62/63 from the rejoicing of Fabius Valens' troops over the omen of the eagle ('gaudentium militum') to their carefree approach to the Treviri ('et Treviros quidem ut socios securi adiere'); and at 64/65 from the fresh, veiled discord between Manlius Valens and Fabius Valens to the long-standing, overt hostility between Lugdunum and Vienne.

¹⁹ So H. Heubner, *P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien: Band 1 – Erstes Buch* (Heidelberg, 1963), p. 185.

dies Cornelius Dolabella', and the juxtaposition *anteibat/sepositus* has to be deliberate.²⁰ For the rest, there is the straightforward contrast between 'sceleris instinator' and 'sceleris cogitatio' at chapters 22/23, and those between Otho and the praetorians at chapters 45/46 and 82/83.²¹

Subtle examples of this technique are easier to find. In chapters 39/40, for a start, Tacitus reports that enthusiasm among Galba's supporters waned (39.2: 'languentibus omnium studiis, qui primo alacres fidem atque animum ostentaverant'), and then has Galba tossed about physically by the crowd (40.1: 'agebatur huc illuc Galba vario turbae fluctuantis impulsu'). Since *languere* and *fluctuare* are each *hapax*, Tacitus obviously has in mind a particular effect, a transition prompted by the contrast between a calm and a choppy sea.²² Similarly, in chapter 55 the legions of Upper Germany have no candidate for the throne: 'neque enim adhuc cui imputaretur'. The next chapter then begins 'spectator flagitii Hordeonius Flaccus consularis legatus aderat'. Even in context this is an odd way of emphasizing Hordeonius' passivity, and well removed from Plutarch's 'nothing but a shadow and image of Galba' (*Galb.* 22.7). But when the expression is set against 'cui imputaretur', we have an unusual antithesis, between one on whom an obligation can be imposed and one who, albeit a consular legate, remains strictly an onlooker.²³ More *recherché* still, to judge by the perplexity it has caused, is the transition at chapters 33/34. Galba is hamstrung by a dispute between his advisers, Vinus urging that 'manendum intra domum' (32.2), whereas 'festinandum ceteris videbatur' (33.1).²⁴ The disagreement becomes so intense that 'repugnantem huic sententiae Vinus Laco minaciter invasit, stimulante Icelo privati odii pertinacia in publicum exitium'. Since nothing can save Galba now, we miss the point if we set 'in publicum exitium' solely against 'privati odii'.²⁵ Though neither plan is salutary, one seems more becoming – as Tacitus goes

²⁰ Compare *accipiebant/spernebat* at chapters 8/9 (above, n. 18).

²¹ If we include under this heading transitions which rest on a contrast between persons, we should add Otho/Galba at 13/14, Caecina/Vitellius at 52/53, and Caecina/Otho at 70/71 (a case discussed in detail below). A different technique is used at 61/62, on Vitellius and his troops. The earlier chapter deals with the distribution of duties in the upcoming campaign, the latter antithetically with the spirit in which they are undertaken. This produces an explicit contrast in 62.1 ('mira inter exercitum imperatorem diversitas'), attributable probably to Tacitus' wish now to expand on this difference: see U. Rademacher, *Die Bildkunst des Tacitus* (Hildesheim and New York, 1975), pp. 173–4.

²² As is remarked by Heubner, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–2, this is the first known application of 'fluctuare' to people, and the word is *hapax* in Tacitus (Gerber and Greef, *op. cit.*, p. 474). As for *languere* (*ibid.*, p. 742), poets use it regularly of the calming of the sea (Vergil, *Aen.* 10.288; Manilius 3.631; Lucan 5.454; Silius 7.259; Martial 10.30.12). The idea for the image comes probably from the common source, since Plutarch, *Galb.* 26.4–5, talks of a 'change of wind' and a 'surging sea'.

²³ Tacitus resorts to *spectator* only three times, all in the *Histories*. But whereas the two other cases bring in games explicitly (2.91.2; 3.83.1), that is at most implied here (by 'circumspectabant' at 55.2). So it is no doubt the oxymoronic association of 'spectator flagitii' with 'consularis legatus' which drives home the point that Hordeonius could have been one 'cui imputaretur'.

²⁴ The opening of 33 is set up by 32.2 ('interim Galbam duae sententiae distinebant'), and the *commissura* lies in the chiasmic antithesis of *Vinus manendum/festinandum ceteris*: cf. Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 78. As for the *duae sententiae*, they – given the way events will develop (see below) – follow naturally from the 'studiis inanibus' of 32.1.

²⁵ Thus G. A. Davies, *Tacitus, Histories Book I* (Cambridge, 1896), p. 106; cf. Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 94. As was observed by E. Wolff, *Taciti Historiarum Libri, Buch I und II* (Berlin, 1914), p. 99, the 'in' of 'in publicum exitium' points to a consequence which may be intended or unintended. Here the latter makes the better sense, and the phrase is equivalent to 'and so all were destroyed'.

on to say (34.1): 'nec diutius Galba cunctatus speciosiora suadentibus accessit'. So 'in publicum exitium' contrasts also with 'speciosiora', producing an antithesis especially attractive to the historian, between the reality of destruction for all and the finer appearances held out by one group.²⁶ Finally, there is a paradoxical contrast at chapters 44/45. Tacitus records Vitellius' hunting down those who had sought reward for participation in Galba's murder, 'non honore Galbae, sed tradito principibus more munimentum ad praesens, in posterum ultionem'. His return to the narrative present with 'aliud crederes senatum, aliud populum' (45.1) obviously creates an antithesis between emperors on the one side, senate and people on the other. But if we give full force to 'tradito' and 'aliud', the latter emphasized by anaphora, we have emperors acting in a traditional manner, discontinuity in the behaviour of senate and people – clear proof of the changed values which, as Tacitus had said at the start (1.1.1–2), were engendered by the principate.

Chapters held together by antithetical thought are more frequent, but as we shall be dealing with several problematical examples later, it should be sufficient here to adduce three cases from the beginning of the book. Thus, chapter 1 concludes with Tacitus' remark on the 'rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet'. It is no surprise that he next describes his work and the twenty-eight years it covers as 'opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevom'.²⁷ Similarly, he winds up chapter 2 with the comment that those who lacked enemies were 'per amicos oppressi'. The viciousness of such behaviour being patent, it makes sense for Tacitus to reassure his readers with the antithetical observation that 'non tamen adeo virtutum sterile saeculum, ut non et bona exempla prodiderit' (3.1).²⁸ Finally, he spends the second half of chapter 4 on the attitudes of the various categories of civilians to be found in Rome before starting chapter 5 with 'miles urbanus'.²⁹

The importance Tacitus attaches to *commissura* can be brought out, lastly, by examining his procedure at the four natural breaks in his narrative. For what we have here are pauses, two major and two minor, which are nonetheless treated by Tacitus as pauses in a continuum. The first, a minor break, occurs at the close of chapter 3, where he ends the preface proper with a notable *sententia*: 'adprobaturum est non esse

²⁶ Even if 'speciosiora' demonstrates that Galba was not receiving disinterested advice (Chilver, op. cit., pp. 94–5; E. Keitel, *ANRW* ii.33, 4 (Berlin, 1991), pp. 2791–2), we need not assume that it hints at Vinus' treachery (that detail is reserved for more telling use in chapter 42: below, p. 289). Wolff, loc. cit., aptly quoted Livy 22.3.8, 'salutaria magis quam speciosa suadentibus', an antithesis Tacitus could have reversed, had he thought either plan likely to save Galba (that he did not is indicated by the juxtaposition of 'studiis inanibus' and 'duae sententiae' at 32.1–2: cf. above, n. 24). So this is simply another example of 'speciosus' in the sense of 'handsome' (*Agr.* 44.4) or 'fine' (*Ann.* 3.55.2).

²⁷ That Tacitus wrote 'opimum' is clear: B. Baldwin, *Eranos* 87 (1989), 79–80. As for the 'opus' in 'opus adgredior' (see Heubner, op. cit., p. 21), to replace it with 'tempus', as is urged by K. Wellesley in his Teubner edition (Leipzig, 1989) and in *ANRW* ii.33, 3 (Berlin, 1991), pp. 1654–5, would produce a matching of words, *temporum/tempus*, which seems far too obvious and unsubtle for Tacitus.

²⁸ For the train of thought see Fuhrmann, op. cit., p. 253; N. Miller, *G & R* 24 (1977), 14. Note too the contrast at 54/55, between the bellicosity of the legions in Upper Germany and the acquiescence, albeit reluctant, of those of Lower Germany in taking the oath.

²⁹ The seemingly clumsy transition at 8.1 ('et hic quidem Romae') is designed to cue the reader to the catalogue which follows (above, n. 18). Other variations on this kind of antithesis are provided by 31/32, a contrast between the inactive 'Germanica vexilla' and the active 'universa plebs' in Rome, and 88/89, a contrast between troubled aristocrats and untroubled people, again in Rome.

curae deis securitatem nostram, esse ultionem'. Then he opens his survey of the empire's situation in January 69 with words reminiscent of Sallust (*Iug.* 5.3): 'ceterum antequam destinata componam' (4.1). It looks like a clean break, and yet there is a parallelism in agenda, between the gods' *cura* and the historian's *destinata*.³⁰ There is no need to argue this case further, since a minor break requires only a minor linkage. And yet the unity of everything that has preceded is emphasized by the conclusion to chapter 11, the end of the survey, where – in an indisputable example of ring-composition – Tacitus echoes the opening words of the preface in chapter 1: 'hic fuit rerum Romanarum status, cum Servius Galba iterum Titus Vinius consules inchoavere annum sibi ultimum, rei publicae prope supremum'.³¹ This break is clearly major, but it is far less abrupt than it appears on the surface to be or, to put it another way, Tacitus does far more to establish underlying linkages with what follows. For in the opening words of the main account ('paucis post kalendas Ianuarias diebus'), the 'diebus' is obviously set antithetically against the preceding 'annum'. And if we allow that the date, itself imprecise, implies a beginning, it picks up the idea in 'inchoavere', while the way in which they bracket 'annum... ultimum... supremum' produces a conceptual chiasmus to straddle the break – as does also the alliteration in 'publicae prope supremum paucis post'.

The third break, again minor, occurs at the close of chapter 49, the necrology of Galba, which ends with Tacitus' famous epigram 'omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset'. There seems to be no immediate connection with the elegant sentence that starts chapter 50: 'trepidam urbem et simul atrocitatem recentis sceleris, simul veteres Othonis mores paventem novus insuper de Vitellio nuntius exterruit'. But quite apart from the fact that Galba's death, the *recens scelus*, had been caused by the 'veteres Othonis mores' which are now set against the 'novus insuper de Vitellio nuntius', those who ruled the *imperium* ruled also the *urbs*. So, simply by bringing 'trepidam urbem' to the head of the sentence, Tacitus creates a straightforward linkage in the association of 'imperii... imperasset... urbem'.³²

As its opening sentence indicates, chapter 50 is transitional in nature. Having commented on the vices of Otho and Vitellius ('quorum bello solum id scires, deteriorem fore qui vicisset'), therefore, Tacitus passes to Vespasian, and since some are said to have thought him 'potior utroque', he is first compared to and then contrasted with his rivals: 'et ambigua de Vespasiano fama, solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mu<ta>us est'. And this comment marks the fourth break in the narrative, clearly major, since Tacitus opens chapter 51 by reverting to Vitellius, again in words reminiscent of Sallust: 'nunc initia causasque motus Vitelliani expediam'.³³ That this break is more abrupt than that at chapters 11/12 is not surprising: the historian has already signalled his intention of switching subjects, and

³⁰ The *commissura* cannot lie in any association between 'deis' and 'destinata'; despite 4.84.2, Tacitus seldom uses the verb of the gods: cf. Gerber and Greef, op. cit., pp. 280–1. As for the echo of Sallust, discerned by G. Schoenfeld, *De Taciti studiis Sallustianis* (Diss., Leipzig, 1884), p. 49, Heubner, op. cit., p. 28, and Chilver, op. cit., p. 45, the passage reads: 'sed prius quam huiusce modi rei initium expedio, pauca supra repetam, quo ad cognoscendum omnia industria magis magisque in aperto sint'. Through 'initium' the sentence is linked antithetically with its predecessor (*Iug.* 5.2: 'finem faceret'), but there is no obvious *commissura* with what follows.

³¹ See, e.g., Fuhrmann, op. cit., p. 261; A. D. Leeman, *YCIS* 23 (1973), 174 and 176.

³² For the association of 'imperium' and 'urbs' see especially 1.90.3 ('quietem urbis curasque imperii'); also 2.28.2, 3.68.1; *Dial.* 5.3; *Ann.* 1.9.5, 4.32.2, 6.11.1.

³³ So Schoenfeld, op. cit., p. 50, again adducing *Iug.* 5.3; cf. M. M. Sage, *ANRW* ii.33, 2 (Berlin, 1990), p. 883.

following a practice he will use also in the *Annals*, he makes the mid-point of the book the pivot for that switch.³⁴ Yet at the conceptual level there is again linkage through antithesis, and not merely in Vitellius' being set against Vespasian. The comment on the latter's improvement *qua* emperor has as its immediate function the accentuation of that contrast: just as the Flavian will be changed 'in melius' after winning the war with Vitellius, so Vitellius' preparations will win the war against Otho and prove him the 'deterior'. Besides, these comments indicate that the story is by no means over, that Vespasian is being held in reserve, and that since the reader is already familiar with the 'veteres Othonis mores', Vitellius must come next – as indeed he does.³⁵

Nor is this quite all. We ought also to remark the way in which Tacitus embeds in less than thirty lines of text three epigrams which summarize the antinomies of 69: there is one on the man who would have been better off, had he never become emperor, one on the two contenders of whom the worse would prevail, and one on the first man to be improved by becoming emperor. This ordering is clearly designed to balance Vespasian against Galba, just as Otho is balanced against Vitellius.³⁶ Modern readers have been captivated above all by the verdict on Galba. Yet he represented merely the end of the beginning, whereas the beginning of the end is marked by Vespasian. And so far as we can tell, the *sententia* on the Flavian is the only one of the three which is entirely original.³⁷ It is the only one positioned deliberately at a strong break in the action and, as such, surely climactic in intent. And though its imprecision has been seen as grounds for the suspicion that it was engendered by rhetorical rather than historical considerations, namely, the creation of the strongest possible contrast with Galba, we would do well to remember that the judgement is strictly relative. Far from being a programmatic announcement of Tacitus' attitude to the Flavian dynasty, it indicates merely that Vespasian improved, something he could have done easily enough when his *fama* beforehand was *ambigua*.³⁸ But such are the lengths to which Tacitus will go to achieve *commissura*.

The reason for emphasizing the significance Tacitus attaches to *commissura* in all its forms – and for ploughing through them so laboriously – lies in the fact that this drive for literary artistry seems at times to come into conflict with the requirements of historical accuracy, leading less to a misrepresentation of events or motives than to a skewing in the focus or the emphasis. To take first a case we have discussed already, it would be easy to contend that Cornelius Dolabella, brought on stage with the juxtaposition of *anteibat/sepositus* at 87/88, is introduced as much for literary as for historical reasons, in the same way that literary as much as historical reasons

³⁴ Sage, op. cit., pp. 883–4; cf. B. Walker, *CP* 71 (1976), 117. Since the remainder of the book is split equally between Vitellius (51–70) and Otho (71–90), a fifth break could be discerned at 70/71, but as will be demonstrated below, *commissura* is employed to close any gap.

³⁵ Cf. P. Ammann, *Der künstlerische Aufbau von Tacitus, Historien I 12–II 51 (Kaiser Otho)* (Diss., Zürich, 1931), p. 46. For a discussion of such open-ended closure in Vergil see Betty Rose Nagle, *CW* 76 (1983), 257–63.

³⁶ So, rightly, P. Wuilleumier, H. Le Bonniec and J. Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite, Histoires Livre I* ('Budé', Paris, 1987), p. 186 n. 12.

³⁷ For the similarities between Tacitus' portrayal of Galba and Plutarch's (*Galb.* 29), see, e.g., Ph. Fabia, *Les Sources de Tacite dans les 'Histoires' et les 'Annales'* (Paris, 1893), pp. 35–6. On the epigram about Otho and Vitellius see R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), i.200.

³⁸ For the difficulties the remark has caused see Chilver, op. cit., p. 111; Sage, op. cit., p. 910; P. Magno, *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Vespasiani* (Rieti, 1981), ii.439–42. As is justly observed by D. C. A. Shotter, *ANRW* ii.33, 5 (Berlin, 1991), p. 3296, Tacitus' apophthegms 'are closely tied to contexts, rather than being general observations which are universally applicable'.

explain his omission from the debate on Galba's successor.³⁹ For Tacitus devotes a single sentence to the man: 'sepositus per eos dies Cornelius Dolabella in coloniam Aquinatem, neque arta custodia neque obscura, nullum ob crimen, sed vetusto nomine et propinquitate Galbae monstratus'. This said, he returns to Otho and his intended companions on the march north: 'multos e magistratibus, magnam consularium partem Otho non participes aut ministros bello, sed comitum specie expedire iubet'. The connection in the thought has to be that even if these people had held higher office than Dolabella, they shared his predicament, the one real difference between 'comitum specie' and 'neque arta custodia neque obscura' being terminological.⁴⁰ Though the fact of Dolabella's relegation is unquestionable, we cannot assert that it had to be set at this and at no other place in the narrative. Not only is 'per eos dies' one of Tacitus' vaguest temporal expressions, but 'nullum ob crimen' rejects the grounds for the relegation Plutarch apparently found in the common source, suspicions of Dolabella's loyalty entertained by the praetorian guard (*Otho* 5.1), and so clears the way for a generic explanation applicable to many in Otho's entourage, 'sed vetusto nomine et propinquitate Galbae monstratus'.⁴¹ It is a reasonable conclusion that Tacitus, having decided to report Dolabella's confinement, positioned it in such a way as simultaneously to generate a *commissura* with the previous chapter and to point up the open arrest in which the other prominent men were trapped.

Similar literary techniques can be seen at work in chapters 71–73. The first of these deals with the vicissitudes of Marius Celsus, a partisan of Galba previously saved from the anger of Otho's troops and now made an intimate of the emperor. This tale Tacitus concludes with the remark that 'laeta primoribus civitatis, celebrata in vulgus Celsi salus ne militibus quidem ingrata fuit, eandem virtutem admirantibus, cui irascebantur'. In chapter 72 Tacitus turns to Tigellinus: 'par inde exsultatio disparibus causis consecuta impetrato Tigellini exitio'. Since the 'par exsultatio' matches the joy or pleasure which informs the entire preceding sentence, while 'inde', 'disparibus causis' and 'consecuta' all serve as connectives, we may overlook two more points of contact. Celsus is credited explicitly with *virtus*, a quality never to be imputed to Nero's favourite, as Tacitus will make clear in everything he says about

³⁹ Tacitus' not mentioning Dolabella in the succession debate (1.13–16), despite K. Wellesley, *JRS* 71 (1981), 224, is no proof that he 'is not invariably in command of his material'. From a literary point of view, Dolabella's introduction would have thrown off the antitheses built around Otho and Piso (cf. Syme, op. cit. i.151 n. 3). Historically, we can argue either that Tacitus thought the man a cipher (below, n. 40), or that Galba would never have considered Dolabella seriously, if the emperor had disbanded the *Germani custodes* because he believed them too well disposed to Dolabella (so Suet. *Galb.* 12.2). Galba was not one to favour those who, in fact or fancy, took an independent line: cf. J. Sancerre, *Galba ou l'armée face au pouvoir* (Paris, 1983), pp. 58–9; C. L. Murison, *ANRW* ii.33, 3 (Berlin, 1991), pp. 1697–8.

⁴⁰ There is no evidence that Dolabella had held public office, only a hint that he had been a *Salus Palatinus* since c. 40 (Grogan, *PIR*² C 1346–7). If this was so, Tacitus may have taken the failure to hold office as proof of an unambitious nature. That could help to explain why the historian omits him from the succession debate, remarks the absence of a formal charge here (*nullum ob crimen*), and seemingly thinks him innocent of the charges which led to his execution by Vitellius (2.63–4).

⁴¹ Like 'per eosdem dies' (3.46.1, *hapax*) and 'per eos menses' (4.81.1, *hapax*), 'per eos dies' gives only a general idea of the time, both here and on its six other appearances (1.20.2; 3.38.1 and 63.2; *Agr.* 41.1; *Ann.* 1.69.1; 14.21.4). Plutarch, *Otho* 5.1, sets the relegation in the same general period but, significantly for our purposes, places it ahead of Otho's choice of commanders and companions. Nonetheless, as is emphasized by Murison, op. cit., p. 1701, the chronological vagueness of 1.71–90 probably goes back to the common source. If Tacitus took advantage of such a situation to achieve his effects, we are not entitled to reprove him for a cavalier attitude toward the facts.

the man. And the antithesis of 'salus' and 'exitium' is – as usual – one the historian cannot resist.⁴² There are no grounds for thinking that the two events occurred in a different order, but Tacitus has gone far beyond a chronological link to tie them together.⁴³

Much of chapter 72 is taken up with Tigellinus' surviving through Galba's reign, and the additional unpopularity this caused. Once Otho had seized the throne, therefore, everyone clamoured for the man's punishment, 'donec Tigellinus accepto apud Sinuessanas aquas supremæ necessitatis nuntio inter stupra concubinarum et oscula et deformes moras sectis novacula faucibus infamem vitam foedavit etiam exitu sero et inhonesto'. On this follows (73.1): 'per idem tempus expostulata ad supplicium Calvia Crispinilla variis frustrationibus et adversa dissimulantis principis fama periculo exempta est'. Here too we have an apparently straightforward chronological link in 'per idem tempus',⁴⁴ but reporting the two events in this sequence not only provides Tacitus with a smooth means of returning to the conflict between Otho and Vitellius (as we shall see presently), but sets up as well three immediate antitheses. First, there is again a contrast between death and survival, a contrast reinforced by the facts that both characters are objects of an outcry and delaying tactics are used in both cases.⁴⁵ Second, something that becomes clearer as the narrative unfolds, there is on the one side a man who commits suicide in unmanly fashion amid women, on the other a woman who, as 'magistra libidinum', had shared Nero's favour with Tigellinus but had played a man's role in Galba's day, 'transgressa in Africam ad instigandum in arma Clodium Macrum, famem populo Romano haud obscure molita'.⁴⁶ And third, she is rescued now by the kind of tergiversation on Otho's part ('adversa dissimulantis principis fama') which had prolonged Tigellinus' life and unpopularity under Galba, and yet 'totius postea civitatis gratiam obtinuit'. It would be absurd to claim that Tacitus could have contrived none of these effects, had he placed Calvia Crispinilla between Celsus and Tigellinus. But any other ordering would undoubtedly have reduced his chances for striking antitheses.

⁴² Cf. H. Bardon, 'A propos des *Histoires*: Tacite et la tentation de la rhétorique', *Hommages à Léon Herrmann* (Brussels, 1960), pp. 146–51, especially p. 149. Besides the examples of the *salus/exitium* contrast discussed below, note its use at 58/59 of the slaughter of Crispinus and the saving of Civilis (continuing a sequence begun within chapter 58). Similarly, the transition at 63/64 rests on an opposition between Treviri acting 'pro pace' and the 'nuntium de caede Galbae'.

⁴³ Plutarch, *Otho* 1.1–2 and 2.1–4 gives the same sequence and – to introduce Tigellinus' suicide (2.1) – much the same phrasing. So a wish to outshine the common source may have prompted the stylistic elaboration (as in the case of Iulius Martialis, examined below) and – for that matter – the artistic arrangement of chapters 71–73 (cf. Ammann, op. cit., p. 69).

⁴⁴ In the *Annals* Tacitus uses 'per idem tempus' fifteen times, otherwise only here; cf. Heubner, op. cit., p. 154; C. J. Tuplin, *Latomus* 46 (1987), 801–5.

⁴⁵ A wish not to detract from this antithesis may help to explain why Tacitus refers to Otho's part in the suicide only obliquely ('accepto... nuntio'), but see below, p. 288.

⁴⁶ It is not worth belabouring the unusual and unaristocratic nature of Tigellinus' suicide (see Suet. *Cal.* 23.3; Petron. *Sat.* 108.10–11; Apul. *Met.* 5.22), since it is difficult to see how else a man under guard could have disposed of himself save while shaving (Plut. *Otho* 2.4). Nor was Sinuessa frequented particularly by women, as was claimed by L. Valmaggi, *Tacito, Il libro primo delle Storie* (Turin, 1891), p. 114. It was a spa (Tac. *Ann.* 12.66; cf. Plin. *NH* 31.8), and Tigellinus was sick (Plut. *Otho* 2.2). As for Calvia Crispinilla, Groag, *PIR*² C 363, collects the known facts, while Murison, op. cit., pp. 1694–5, assesses recent speculation about her. I cannot agree with A. J. Marshall, *AncSoc* 15–17 (1984–6), 172, that Tacitus regards her as an evil person (cf. R. Syme, *Roman Papers* (Oxford, 1984), iii.1367), and male/female contrasts obviously occur in his work more often than was maintained by H. Königer, *Gestalt und Welt der Frau bei Tacitus* (Diss., Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1966), p. 65.

There is no evidence that in these cases (Dolabella's as much as those of the other three) Tacitus has misrepresented the facts, any more than he does in his judgement on Vespasian. Nor is the elaboration of his account reason enough to impugn his historical accuracy. We could argue that his literary intent was simply to weave into his narrative a string of incidents which, no matter how illustrative of these dire times (cf. 1.2.3), were peripheral to his main theme. But even if this explanation is sufficient, it will not work for the linkages used to embed Iulius Martialis in the text of chapter 28. Very much a part of the action, the tribune has the power to check the blossoming of Otho's coup by denying the conspirators entry to the praetorian camp. This situation Tacitus sets up in chapter 27, with Otho's being rushed to the camp by 23 *speculatores* and as many *milites* picked up en route: 'alii conscientia, plerique miraculo, pars clamore et gladiis, pars silentio, animum ex eventu sumpturi'. On this follows (28): 'stationem in castris agebat Iulius Martialis tribunus. is magnitudine subiti sceleris, an corrupta latius castra et, si contra tenderet, exitium metuens, praebuit plerisque suspicionem conscientiae.' If we were to limit the linkage to the two sentences on either side of the chapter division, we would have at most an antithesis between the soldiers and their officer and, as Plutarch's pedestrian account shows more clearly (*Galb.* 25.4–5), another between their relative positions, outside and within the camp. But the sentence on the tribune's reactions echoes the moods of the rankers detail by detail. Martialis was either overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crime (matching the wonderment in 'plerique miraculo'),⁴⁷ or fearful of opposing it (for practical purposes equivalent to 'animum ex eventu sumpturi'), and so gave many reason to think him involved (picking up 'alii conscientia'). Nor is this responsion, A – B – C – B – C – A, likely to be accidental when the lead-out from this chapter is more intricate still.

All the other officers, says Tacitus, took the same line as Martialis, 'isque habitus animorum fuit, ut pessimum facinus auderent pauci, plures vellent, omnes paterentur'. Then comes chapter 29: 'ignarus interim Galba et sacris fatigabat alieni iam imperii deos'. The special effects in the earlier sentence have often been remarked.⁴⁸ To mention only the most obvious, there is the ascending sequence 'pauci – plures – omnes', counterbalanced by the descending 'auderent – vellent – paterentur'; there is the alliteration in 'pessimum... pauci, plures... paterentur'; and there is a chiasmus ('auderent... vellent') set against the symmetrical 'plures... paterentur'. Where meaning is concerned, however, 'paterentur' not only looks back to 'auderent' (cf. 2.46.2), but also prepares for 'ignarus', ignorance being one small step beyond indifference.⁴⁹ Then there is the sardonic antithesis between the praetorians' preoccupation with a 'pessimum facinus' and Galba's with religious rites. And though 'alieni' seems to be balanced primarily against 'ignarus... Galba' (cf. 2.16.2), the description of the gods as 'alieni iam imperii' must reflect on the praetorians, officers and men, inasmuch as the *imperium* whose ruler they were sworn to protect passed now to another because of their lack of loyalty and determination in the face – according to Tacitus – of less than 50 dissidents.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Though sometimes rendered bewilderment or mere curiosity, 'miraculo' denotes wonderment (cf. Gerber and Greef, op. cit., p. 843).

⁴⁸ See especially Valmaggia, op. cit., p. 51; Wolff, op. cit., p. 91; Heubner, op. cit., p. 70.

⁴⁹ The association is rare in Tacitus, but reappears in Galba's necrology (49.3): 'amicorum libertorumque, ubi in bonos incidisset, sine reprehensione patiens, si mali forent, usque ad culpam ignarus'.

⁵⁰ According to Plut. *Galb.* 25.4, the group confronting Martialis had been a good deal larger, since on the way to the camp 'others again kept joining them by threes and fours', nor is this implausible: cf. P. Fabia, *RPh* 36 (1912), 89.

Since Tacitus' relish for verbal pyrotechnics will not by itself account for this elaboration, it is reasonable to conclude that he found nothing more of substance about this episode in the common source and, unwilling to reduce its importance with the banalities Plutarch records, chose to add force to his narrative by compressing the details and by developing the interplay between the few he reported.⁵¹ His comment then would be less a distortion of the record than an overstatement for effect, and for this there is a parallel of sorts in the less elaborate *commissura* at chapters 38/39. After giving Otho a major speech (37.1–38.2), Tacitus describes the troops' excited response as they snatch up arms without control or discrimination, 'nullo tribunorum centurionumve adhortante, sibi quisque dux et instigator; et praecipuum pessimorum incitamentum, quod boni maerebant'. It has been observed that there is nothing in this account to indicate that at this late date there were in the praetorian camp loyalists to incite the *pessimi*, and that the statement has 'no real basis in the events described by Tacitus'.⁵² But the ablative absolute 'nullo ... adhortante' does not mean that the men anticipated exhortation they would have received had they been more patient. Since he has indicated earlier that the men mistrusted their officers (36.1), he is telling us here that if the troops had waited, they would have waited in vain: the officers are the *boni*. And Tacitus organizes his material this way in order to facilitate the transition into chapter 39, the first words of which are 'iam exterritus Piso'. For 'Piso' obviously picks up 'boni', and when we recall that Otho has just declared 'tristitia' one of the young man's traits (38.1; cf. 14.2), there is a reason for 'maerebant' too. The ordering is perhaps artificial, the contrast between good and evil overdrawn, but that is the most we can say.

The *commissura* at chapters 73/74 is much more problematical. Tacitus is passing from the story of Calvia Crispinilla to an exchange of letters between Otho and Vitellius. The woman, he asserts, survived Galba, Otho and Vitellius unscathed, 'mox potens pecunia et orbitate, quae bonis malisque temporibus iuxta valent'; then (74.1) 'crebrae interim et muliebribus blandimentis infectae ab Othone ad Vitellium epistulae offerebant pecuniam et gratiam et quemcumque e quietis locis prodigae vitae legisset'. Besides 'interim' there are three more connections. First, the enumeration of the emperors outlived by Calvia Crispinilla no doubt signals Tacitus' intention of returning to his main theme, but it also sets up another contrast between a woman who survives and men who do not. Second, there is her acquisition of real, non-political power ('pecunia ... valent') and the offer of similar benefits to Vitellius ('pecuniam ... legisset'), an offer he will reject, at least in part because he alone among these emperors is not marked *orbitate*. Third, and most important, Otho's letters are 'muliebribus blandimentis infectae', that is, 'tainted with the blandishments a woman would offer'.⁵³ This conflicts not only with the testimony of Plutarch and Suetonius, who report simply that he was conciliatory,⁵⁴ but also with Tacitus' own earlier observation that 'non erat Othonis mollis et corpori similis animus' (22.1). We are left, it appears, with two equally uncomfortable options. Either we accuse the historian of gross exaggeration, if not of outright malice. Or we argue that the comment makes sense as a connective which sets up – as in the transition at 72/73 – the antithesis between a mannish woman and a womanish man,⁵⁵ and in so doing

⁵¹ The compression is stressed by Ammann, *op. cit.*, p. 37; cf. also E. Courbaud, *Les Procédés d'art de Tacite dans les 'Histoires'* (Paris, 1918), pp. 62–3.

⁵² P. Plass, *Wit and the Writing of History* (Madison and London, 1988), p. 146 n. 40.

⁵³ So, rightly, Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 155; cf. Gerber and Greef, *op. cit.*, p. 876.

⁵⁴ Plut. *Otho* 4.4; Suet. *Otho* 8.1.

⁵⁵ Cf. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–3, characterizing it as a 'resumptive echo of Crispinilla's wily hypocrisy'.

opens the way for the charge, always more easily made than substantiated, that 'in any conflict between style and content, style will inevitably prevail'.⁵⁶

The simplest way of ruling out malice is to examine the conclusion of chapter 79, to all appearances Tacitus' most savage comment on Otho. Having reported the incursion into Moesia by the Rhoxolani and their defeat as much by a change in the weather as by Roman forces in the area, Tacitus winds up his account (79.5): 'postquam id Romae compertum, M. Aponius Moesiam obtinens triumphali statua, Fulvus Aurelius et Iulianus Tettius ac Numisius Lupus, legati legionum, consularibus ornamentis donantur, laeto Othone et gloriam in se trahente, tamquam et ipse felix bello et suis ducibus suisque exercitibus rem publicam auxisset'. Once we allow for the needs of *commisura*, it becomes clear that these remarks are designed in good measure to create the strongest possible contrast with the praetorian mutiny occupying the next six chapters. For the way in which Tacitus introduces the mutiny (80.1: 'parvo interim initio, unde nihil timebatur, orta seditio prope urbi excidio fuit') sets up a string of contrasts. There is the antithesis between an enemy beyond the frontiers and one in the heart of Rome ('rem publicam auxisset' as against 'urbi'). The incursion of the Rhoxolani, again, had not arisen 'parvo initio'; they had wiped out two cohorts 'priore hieme' (79.1). Their invasion had not been something 'unde nihil timebatur'. And it was only after the war had begun that they had been denied the chance to be 'prope urbi excidio'.

Yet we lack grounds to question Tacitus' reliability here. It makes no difference whether the Rhoxolani were defeated in Galba's reign or after Otho succeeded him.⁵⁷ Nor is it germane that Otho hitherto had shown military prowess only during a route march from Spain.⁵⁸ Emperor when the news reached Rome, he was entitled to claim the credit for any victories gained by generals in the field, as Tacitus must concede.⁵⁹ The important question is the nature of the achievements for which he took the credit. The emperor, Tacitus avers, acted 'tamquam... rem publicam auxisset', as though he had made fresh conquests and extended the frontiers of the empire,⁶⁰ when all that had happened was the expulsion of a tribe from an existing province. These tribesmen, moreover, were defeated both by the weather and by the 'tertia legio adiunctis auxiliis' (79.1), and yet Otho showered honours not only on its commander (Aurelius Fulvus), but also on the legates of VII Claudia and VIII Augusta as well as on the governor of Moesia. So Tacitus' point is not that Otho was generous,⁶¹ but that he carried things to excess, just as he had done with the senators (chapter 77) and with the provinces (78.1: 'eadem largitione'). A wish to create the contrast with the praetorian mutiny may have helped to shape the historian's language, but only the successful conclusion of a massive war of conquest would have justified the lavish rewards Otho broadcast.

Once we recognize that it is not malice which animates chapter 79, the most acid of the group leading into the story of the mutiny, we need not take the characterization of Otho's letters as 'muliebribus blandimentis infectae' as a sneer – or even as an overstatement. In Tacitus' eyes, the emperor's extravagant treatment of senators,

⁵⁶ So Murison, *op. cit.*, p. 1711.

⁵⁷ See Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 167 and literature there cited.

⁵⁸ See 1.23 with the discussion by Heubner, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–3.

⁵⁹ The ironic tone of the passage, best exemplified by the instrumental ablatives 'suis ducibus suisque exercitibus' (cf. Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 167), indicates not Tacitus' doubts about Otho's right to make the claims, but his own inability to deny it.

⁶⁰ For this use of 'augere' compare 5.9.2 and *Ann.* 1.31.5.

⁶¹ See Heubner, *loc. cit.*; Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

provinces and commanders sprang from the development recorded at the start of chapter 76: 'primus Othoni fiduciam addidit ex Illyrico nuntius, iurasse in eum Dalmatiae ac Pannoniae et Moesiae legiones'. And how we are supposed to construe that is shown by the concluding sentence of chapter 75, summing up the effects of the dire threats made by Vitellius, should harm befall his family: 'et stetit domus utraque, sub Othone incertum an metu: Vitellius victor clementiae gloriam tulit'. In making the remark 'incertum an metu', Tacitus appears to imply that there were other, equally valid explanations for Otho's conduct (cf. Plut. *Otho* 4.1), but he undoubtedly wants us to conclude that fear was the true reason. It is no accident that chapter 76 opens with a reference to 'fiducia', a quality he considers the opposite of 'metus' (cf. 2.66.2).⁶² Moreover, the intervening sentence on Vitellius, the collocation 'Vitellius victor' in particular, substantiates that fear, inasmuch as Otho had a civil war to fight, and undercuts the 'fiducia' by which it was succeeded, because he was to lose that war.⁶³ So, when Otho began the correspondence with his rival, his bargaining position in Tacitus' eyes was so weak that his letters must have been 'muliebribus blandimentis infectae'. Nor does this establish merely the internal coherence and the plausibility of chapters 74–79, proofs of Tacitus' literary artistry. Since Plutarch's variant interpretation is open to serious objection, we are entitled to conclude also that Tacitus' artistry has not led him to forsake historical accuracy.⁶⁴

For all that, none of the content of chapters 74–79 seems to agree too well with Tacitus' comments on Otho at the transition between chapters 70 and 71. To appreciate the difficulty, we need to set the scene. Having reported the decision by Caecina and Valens to begin their offensive against Otho forthwith (61.1), and having remarked too on Vitellius' torpor, which grew as fast as did his troops' enthusiasm for war (62.1–2), Tacitus narrates the two expeditions in sequence. He takes Valens first (62.3–66.3), and ends his activities with the plain 'sic ad Alpes perventum'. Then he starts on Caecina's march with the apparently unremarkable 'plus praedae et sanguinis Caecina hausit' (67.1).⁶⁵ This account he closes with a deliberate echo of the earlier reference to the Alps and, by using weightier phraseology, brings out Caecina's greater achievement: 'Poenino itinere subsignanum militem et grave legionum agmen hibernis adhuc Alpius transduxit'.⁶⁶ All this is straightforward, but then comes the

⁶² 'To Tacitus', as it is put by Shotter, *op. cit.*, p. 3299, 'the reality of Otho's principate was fear'. It makes no difference that the emperor subsequently put the best face on his behaviour (2.48.2).

⁶³ Here 'fiducia' means 'confidence'. To convey overconfidence Tacitus adds an adjective, 'nimius' (*Agr.* 37.4), 'ingens' (2.4.2), or 'vanus' (*Ann.* 15.10.3). And though the immediate context indicates the falsity of this 'fiducia', the developments reported in the body of chapter 76 are what turn it into overconfidence and lead to the extravagant behaviour documented in chapters 77–79.

⁶⁴ In Plut. *Otho* 4.2–4, the emperor begins the correspondence confidently because he has already received messages of support from the Balkans and the East. Though some defend this version (cf. Fabia, *Les Sources de Tacite*, pp. 44–5; Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 155), Murison (*op. cit.*, p. 1701) rightly observes that 'given the time needed for even a few letters to pass back and forth... Plutarch's picture is only psychologically reasonable'.

⁶⁵ For the alliteration see above, n. 6. The reference to 'praedae et sanguinis' contrasts with the comment (immediately before 'sic ad Alpes perventum') that Valens, 'quotiens pecuniae materia deesset, stupris et adulteriis exorabatur'. Though Tacitus uses direct comparison to tie together chapters four times, this is one of only two cases where an actual comparative form is employed, the other being 19.1 ('inde apud senatum non comptior... sermo'). Elsewhere he matches like with like (72.1: 'par inde exsultatio'; 78.1: 'eadem largitione').

⁶⁶ As is shown by Heubner's detailed analysis (*op. cit.*, pp. 149–50), it is not quite fair to term these words 'one of the greatest understatements in military history' (Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 134).

first sentence of chapter 71: 'Otho interim contra spem omnium non deliciis neque desidia torpescere: dilatae voluptates, dissimulata luxuria et cuncta ad decorem imperii composita, eoque plus formidinis adferebant falsae virtutes et vitia reditura'.

Since the first clause is undoubtedly factual, while the second presents an interpretation of Otho's conduct which – as we have seen – was known also to Plutarch, we could explain the wording without an appeal to *commissura*. But even if we maintain, for example, that the second clause is designed to obscure any idea that pardoning Marius Celsus, the first act of the new reign, should be considered programmatic,⁶⁷ the energy attributed to Otho in the first clause still has less to do with the treatment of Celsus than it does with creating a match for Caecina, whose crossing of the Alps in winter was no less 'contra spem omnium'. And since Otho's behaviour is described negatively, in terms of the vices he gave up rather than the virtues he brought into play, 'torpescere' helps to drive home the comparison. Such inactivity having been established as Vitellius' dominant trait (cf. 62.1–2), the verb recalls both Caecina's master and Caecina himself.⁶⁸ This in turn provides another reason for Tacitus' mentioning so soon Otho's 'falsae virtutes et vitia reditura'. The opening move in the manoeuvres which will bring this portrait into line with the representation of the man in chapters 74–79, the comment prepares the reader for three more careful touches in this segment of the narrative. First, in pardoning Celsus, Otho does not display *clementia*: 'clementiae titulus ... petebatur'.⁶⁹ Second, Otho's part in the destruction of Tigellinus is minimized, in the oblique 'accepto ... nuntio' (72.3)⁷⁰ And third, Calvia Crispinilla is rescued, but only at the cost of the emperor's reputation (73: 'adversa dissimulantis principis fama'). A wish for linkage may have led Tacitus to overstate Otho's initial energy, but nor is he carried away by his own rhetoric. A string of deft comments produces what turns out to be a unified and plausible account of the emperor's first weeks, and we are clutching at straws if we question its historical accuracy merely because the tone is so hostile. Modern attempts to whitewash the emperor work back from his suicide, an action which certainly won him renown 'apud posteros' (2.50.2). Until that point is reached, Tacitus judges him more realistically, guided above all by his *recens scelus*, the murder of Galba which so clearly dominated the thinking of Otho's contemporaries.⁷¹

In all these cases, therefore, it is reasonable to maintain that Tacitus has done his best to achieve accuracy as well as artistry, and this may help to clarify an episode on which scholars have disagreed for years, namely, the part played by Sempronius Densus, a centurion of the praetorian guard, in the final moments of Galba and Piso. This is not, admittedly, a case that merits the extended discussion it has received in the past – and is about to receive again – but it is the most controversial incident recorded in *Histories* 1, and only recently has it been recognized that Tacitus is not alone among our sources in having a literary axe to grind. According to his account, then, Densus' assignment was to protect the heir apparent, and it was his courageous defence of Piso that gave the latter, wounded though he was, the chance to escape the

⁶⁷ Tacitus' awareness of the importance of programmatic action has been much discussed in connection with *Ann.* 1.6.1 and 13.1.1. It surfaces also in the *Histories* (2.64.1), and it may help to explain why the only indication of time here is the vague 'interim', whereas Plut. *Otho* 1.1 sets the sparing of Celsus explicitly on the first day of the reign. Nonetheless, historical reasons for thinking Tacitus' account preferable were advanced by E. Groag, 'Zur Kritik von Tacitus' Quellen in den Historien', *Jahrbuch für class. Philologie*, Supp. 23 (1897), 711–99, at p. 749.

⁶⁸ Cf. Rademacher, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁶⁹ So 71.1; contrast, of Vitellius, 'clementiae gloriam tulit' (75.2).

⁷⁰ Cf. Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 152; Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁷¹ Cf. Shotter, *op. cit.*, pp. 3299–301.

slaughter in the Forum and to find refuge in the temple of Vesta, until assassins sent by Otho dragged him out and butchered him 'in foribus templi' (43.1–2). While Suetonius agrees with Tacitus to the extent of insisting that Galba died alone and unaided (*Galb.* 19.2–20.1), Plutarch and Dio-Xiphilinus assert that Densus was killed defending Galba, and the biographer adds that the centurion was felled by a wound in or across the back of his legs (τυφθεῖς τὰς ἰγνύας ἔπεσε), the means used to disable Vinus in Tacitus' version (42; see below), and of Piso reports that he was wounded, run down, and slaughtered 'near the temple of Vesta' (πρὸς τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Ἑστίας).⁷²

Though the discrepancies between these accounts are greater than to permit simple conflation,⁷³ they are not marked enough to warrant positing two distinct traditions.⁷⁴ And if it is simplest and most economical to assume that one of our authors has misrepresented the facts, by accident or by design, Tacitus looks much more likely to be the guilty party, inasmuch as he has gone to considerable lengths to arrange the material artistically. For a start, he reports in sequence the deaths of Galba (41), Vinus (42) and Piso (43.2), and then reverses the order for their necrologies, each longer than its predecessor, so that Piso comes first (48.1), Vinus second (48.2–4) and Galba, fittingly, last (49.2–4).⁷⁵ Nor is the *commissura* linking chapters 48/49 unsubtle. Chapter 48 ends with an ironic contrast between the final wishes of Vinus and Piso ('testamentum Titi Vini magnitudine opum inritum, Pisonis supremam voluntatem paupertas firmavit'). But since this encourages the inference that both cases received prompt attention, it creates a further contrast, between that response and the lengthy neglect supposedly suffered by Galba's corpse ('Galbae corpus diu neglectum et licentia tenebrarum plurimis ludibriis vexatum').⁷⁶ Thirdly, Densus is so positioned as to provide Tacitus with an alternation of brave and cowardly deaths for the *commissurae* between chapters 41/42 and 42/43. So the space given to and the layout adopted for Galba's last words prove that he died courageously.⁷⁷ Vinus comes next ('Titum inde Vinium invasere'), and no doubt this is the correct chronological sequence.⁷⁸ But as swiftly emerges, the link is not chronological alone. That Vinus' death was craven is suggested first by the alliterative comment on his final words ('quod seu finxit formidine seu conscientiam coniurationis confessus est'), and then confirmed by the nature of his wounds: he was struck in the back of the knee and run through from side to side ('primo ictu in poplitem, mox ... in utrumque latus transverberatus'), by no stretch of the imagination *vulnera contraria, adversa, or honesta*.⁷⁹ And since this is emphasized by the use of 'insignem ... virum' to introduce the heroic Densus (43.1: 'insignem illa die virum Sempronium Densum aetas nostra

⁷² Plut. *Galb.* 26.7–27.4; Dio-Xiphilinus 64.7.3–5. Zonaras omits the episode, leading Fabia, *RPh* 36 (1912), 116 and D. Flach, *AncSoc* 4 (1973), 162, to suggest that Xiphilinus added details from Plutarch to his summary of Dio. As for the temple of Vesta, this lay at the eastern end of the Forum (S. B. Platner and T. Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 557–8; cf. Chilver, op. cit., p. 102). It is a small but also a significant point that the proximity of the temple to the site of Galba's murder makes it easier to explain the time-lag between Otho's receiving his head and that of Piso μετ' ὀλίγον (Plut. *Galb.* 27.6) with the details Tacitus provides than it is with the biographer's own account.

⁷³ Thus Sancery, op. cit., pp. 166–7.

⁷⁴ So Groag, op. cit., pp. 744–5; G. B. Townend, *AJP* 85 (1964), 358–9; cf. Chilver, op. cit., p. 101.

⁷⁵ Ammann, op. cit., p. 43; cf. also Heubner, op. cit., p. 103; Sage, op. cit., pp. 902–3.

⁷⁶ On the 'diu' see Heubner, op. cit., p. 106. Though there is no parallel elsewhere in Tacitus, there may be a play in 'firmavit' and 'neglectum', since the latter verb can convey a loss of force (cf. 2.54.1; 3.76.2).

⁷⁷ Cf. Flach, op. cit., pp. 162–6.

⁷⁸ Cf. Fabia, op. cit., pp. 114–15.

⁷⁹ For these expressions see 3.84.3, *Ann.* 16.9.2 and *Ann.* 1.49.3 respectively. Tacitus uses *transverbero* only twice more (3.17.1; *Ann.* 13.44.3).

vidit'), it is easy to imagine that Tacitus would have had no compunction about transferring to the cowardly Vinius a wound which Plutarch, in abstract less becomingly but not therefore less plausibly, attributed to Densus.

Nor does this end the matter. There is also Piso's death, in reality the merest butchery. Since Tacitus chooses not to make an issue of Otho's savagery until chapter 44, Densus has a role to play here too. The 'misericordia' of the temple slave who shelters Piso does more than add to the pathos of the scene;⁸⁰ since he owes the young man nothing, the unexpected kindness of this slave, perhaps of long standing, counterbalances the deliberate ingratitude, brought out explicitly, of the newly made citizen who is one of the killers ('Sulpicius Florus e Britannicis cohortibus, nuper a Galba civitate donatus').⁸¹ Similarly, Piso's murder 'in foribus templi', evidencing the unseemly haste of the assassins (cf. 2.64.1), is the reverse of the stalwart defence offered by Densus, who runs to meet the attackers, upbraids them ('scelus exprobrans'), and distracts them from their primary target. Whether or not the centurion's devotion is meant also to suggest that Piso was worth protecting and dying for as a person in his own right, probably the most that could be said for him in the circumstances (cf. 48.1), it would be ill-advised to think fortuitous this sequence of determined loyalty, spontaneous kindness, deliberate ingratitude and precipitate treason.

If Tacitus had made Densus the protector of Galba, obviously, few if any of these effects could have been realized, and this may well reinforce the suspicion that he has manipulated the historical facts to suit his artistic purposes. But such a view rests on two questionable assumptions, not merely that artistry and accuracy are mutually exclusive, a proposition for which we have yet to find unequivocal evidence in *Histories* 1, but also that Plutarch is too unimaginative and pedestrian a writer to have tinkered with the facts for his own ends, an underestimation of his skills which scholarship has only recently corrected.⁸² As has now been demonstrated, Plutarch is perfectly capable of helping the truth along or, better, of helping his truth along, and in the *Galba* his truth is an emperor treated with far more sympathy than any other source can muster, and an emperor granted far more dignity, especially at moments of crisis like his death.⁸³ Besides, the biographer is concerned above all with Galba (*Galb.* 2.5). To have provided detailed accounts of what happened to Piso, Vinius or Laco would have distracted the reader from feeling the full measure of compassion due to the central figure, and so the fates of the others are reported as briefly – and not perhaps as clearly – as possible.⁸⁴ Nor would the emperor's worth have been illustrated as well by letting Densus protect the heir apparent (especially when, in Tacitus' account, he is simply doing his duty: 'a Galba custodiae Pisonis additus'). By transferring Vinius' wound to the centurion, presumably without realizing its implications, and by picturing Densus as Galba's defender, Plutarch can create a tragedy in which two kindred souls reinforce each other's sterling qualities, and so validate his own assessment of the emperor. Plutarch certainly praises Densus far more extravagantly than does Tacitus ('egregium...virum') or Dio-Xiphilinus (64.7.5: ἀξιώτατος...μνημονεύεσθαι), comments explicitly on his sense of honour

⁸⁰ Thus Heubner, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁸¹ This deserves still more stress, if Sulpicius Florus received an individual grant of citizenship (so Chilver, *op. cit.*, p. 102). The various reflections on loyalty or the lack of it go back no doubt to the common source.

⁸² C. B. R. Pelling, *JHS* 100 (1980), 127–40; D. A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 19–52.

⁸³ Cf. Fabia, *op. cit.*, pp. 111–12; Flach, *op. cit.*, pp. 162–6.

⁸⁴ See above, n. 72; also Fabia, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–15.

and his loyalty to an emperor from whom he had received no special favours (by implication the tribute Tacitus pays the 'publicus servus' in the temple of Vesta), and declares him 'the one man among all the thousands who was worthy of the Roman Empire' (ὅν μόνον ἥλιος ἐπέιδεν ἐν μυριάσι τοσαύταις ἄξιον τῆς 'Ρωμαίων ἡγεμονίας').⁸⁵

It is not unreasonable to suppose Plutarch skilful enough (if only just enough) to take disparate details from the common source and attach them to Galba and Densus. It is unreasonable to imagine that Tacitus, as wilful as he could be, would take details applying strictly to two men and spread them across a group ranging from Titus Vinius to a state slave. As we have seen in every other case we have discussed, Tacitus will allow artistic considerations to govern his selection of material and to colour its presentation, but not – so far as we can tell – to distort or to misrepresent the essential facts. Hence it is fair to conclude that in this instance too he has seized upon and exploited to the full every opportunity to arrange his material artistically, but has done so without compromising the accuracy of his account.⁸⁶ Nor need it occasion surprise that we should arrive at this conclusion, although our primary concern has been less his reliability than the care with which he sews together his narrative. If we fail to appreciate the *commissurae* he uses throughout his works, we shall not only underestimate the skill with which he constructed his text and misread its nuances, but grasp at the seemingly artificial blocks in which he organizes it and the sometimes overstated remarks with which he unites them, isolate both from their context, and having given them more weight than they were meant to carry, question their historical accuracy. They are but manifestations of a literary technique designed to produce an account which is all the more readable because artistic, and simultaneously as accurate as the author can make it. As Bury said of Gibbon, 'brilliance of style and accuracy of statement are perfectly compatible in an historian'.⁸⁷

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⁸⁵ Plut. *Galb.* 26.8. In a case where emphasis is so important, it is unhelpful to hold, as does Townend, op. cit., p. 358, that Tacitus and Dio-Xiphilinus have 'paraphrased' what Plutarch reports in full.

⁸⁶ Cf. T. Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1909), vii.234; Fabia, op. cit., pp. 115–17; Ammann, op. cit., p. 42; Flach, op. cit., p. 162; Miller, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸⁷ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by J. B. Bury (London, 1909), i.vii. I wish to thank the Editor and the anonymous referee for the many valuable suggestions they made to the improvement of this paper.