

TIBERIUS AND THE TASTE OF POWER: THE YEAR 33 IN TACITUS*

I

More than two decades have now passed since Sir Ronald Syme published his paper entitled ‘The Year 33 in Tacitus and Dio’.¹ Under this dry rubric, and in the highly allusive manner which became characteristic of him,² the greatest Tacitean scholar of modern times discussed the year in question as described by these two historians writing roughly one hundred years apart. Tacitus describes the year during the course of Book 6 of the *Annals* (6.15–27). The book ends with Tiberius’ obituary notice, where his career as emperor is divided by Tacitus into four periods, each one worse than the last and each designated by the death of a relative or friend (6.51.3).³ The penultimate period ends in the year 31 with the execution of Sejanus, who had appeared to be Tiberius’ faithful minister until he was discovered in treachery; but the narrative of this crucial episode is missing from our text since almost all of Book 5, in which the episode was placed, has been lost. When Book 6 begins, we are already embarked on the final and worst period of Tiberius’ life, which will last until his death in A.D. 37. The year 33 thus occurs roughly a third of the way through this final period, and it has been described by Koestermann as ‘the high point of the reign of terror’.⁴

Syme was attracted to the year 33 for two principal reasons.⁵ First, he believed that the year was important for its own sake, because it constituted a pivotal moment in Tiberius’ rule: its numerous deaths saw the settling of old scores and a break with the past, while its various royal marriages looked forwards to the future. Second, the year offers one of the relatively few occasions on which Tacitus’ account of Tiberius can be compared in detail with that of Dio.

Describing Tacitus’ exposition as ‘a marvel of coherence and variety’, Syme saw his narrative of 33 as divided into two parts (6.15.1–20.1 and 23.1–27.4), separated by a digression on the art of astrology (6.20.2–22.4).⁶ Tacitus mentions four royal

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References to Tacitus’ *Annals* omit the name of author and work (e.g. 1.8.6); references to Book 6 often omit also the book number.

¹ *Athenaeum* 61 (1983), 3–23 = *Roman Papers* 4 (Oxford, 1988), 223–44. Subsequent references will be to the latter, abbreviated as *RP*.

² For this see T. P. Wiseman, ‘Late Syme: a study in historiography’, *Roman Drama and Roman History* (Exeter, 1998), 135–52, 213–16.

³ Tacitus in fact mentions five periods in all (concluding in A.D. 14, 23, 29, 31, and 37, respectively) but the first of them comprises Tiberius’ life before he became emperor. For discussion see A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford, 1998), 156–67.

⁴ E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus: Annalen Band II* (Heidelberg, 1965), 273 (on 6.15.1).

⁵ *RP* 4, 223–4.

⁶ *RP* 4, 224–5; see also Koestermann on 6.15.1, J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (New York, 1981), 73–6, and G. Wille, *Der Aufbau der Werke des Tacitus* (Amsterdam, 1983), 457–61, 625.

marriages and distributes them into three episodes, two of the episodes placed in the first part of the year (6.15.1 Drusilla, Julia Livilla; 20.1 Caligula) and one in the second (27.1 Julia). He also mentions what Syme describes as ‘the deaths of no fewer than twelve named persons’, and these have a converse distribution: a third of them are placed in the first part of the year (18.1 Considius Proculus; 18.2 the father and brother of Pompeia Macrina; 19.1 Sex. Marius) and two-thirds in the second (23.1 Asinius Gallus; 23.2–24.3 Drusus; 25 Agrippina; 26.1–2 Cocceius Nerva; 26.3 Munatia Plancina; 27.2 Aelius Lamia; 27.3 Pomponius Flaccus; 27.4 M. Lepidus). Dio, by contrast, mentions only three royal marriages in a brief passage at the start of the year (58.21.1), and he lists only seven named deaths, of which six are identical with those in Tacitus.⁷

The six deaths that Tacitus and Dio have in common are all violent deaths, either by execution or suicide, but they are ordered differently in each author:

<i>Tacitus</i>	<i>Dio</i>
(a) Sex. Marius	(e) Cocceius Nerva
(b) Asinius Gallus	(a) Sex. Marius
(c) Drusus	(c) Drusus
(d) Agrippina	(d) Agrippina
(e) Cocceius Nerva	(f) Munatia Plancina
(f) Munatia Plancina	(b) Asinius Gallus

This difference of ordering is particularly striking in the case of Munatia Plancina. From the moment of her introduction fourteen years earlier, half-way through Book 2 of the *Annals* (43.4), Plancina has been represented repeatedly and consistently by Tacitus as the enemy of Germanicus and especially of his wife, Agrippina.⁸ Given that both women now die in the same year, we should expect their deaths to be mentioned together, as indeed they are by Dio (58.22.5). Yet in Tacitus the death of Agrippina (25.1–3) is followed by the suicide of Cocceius Nerva (26.1–2), while Munatia Plancina has, in Syme’s words, been ‘removed from what seems her proper position in the sequel to Agrippina’s end’.⁹ This removal is remarkable and can only be deliberate. Why was it that Tacitus, again in Syme’s words, ‘chose to break the link between Agrippina and her enemy’?¹⁰ Or, to put the question differently, what made the suicide of Cocceius Nerva, rather than that of Plancina, a more appropriate sequel to the death of Agrippina?¹¹ The answer to this question will involve illustration of the ‘coherence’ detected by Syme (see V below); but, to view the fuller picture, we must embark on a preliminary discussion of the relevant background (II–IV).

⁷ See *RP* 4, 226. Dio’s seventh death is that of Vibullius Agrippa (58.21.4), which Tacitus places three years later (6.40.1, where, according to the *paradosis*, the man’s name was Vibulenus Agrippa).

⁸ See 2.55.6, 2.74.2–75.2 (and 82.1), 3.15, 3.17.1–2.

⁹ *RP* 4, 234.

¹⁰ *RP* 4, 232.

¹¹ Syme is more interested in the proximity of Nerva’s suicide (6.26.1–2) to the brief paragraph at 27.1, where Julia (Tiberius’ granddaughter) marries Rubellius Blandus (her inferior), a proximity which he explains as a slight on the emperor Nerva and his family (*RP* 4, 197–8, 234). But, if Tacitus had simply transposed the deaths of Nerva and Plancina, he could have actually juxtaposed the suicide and the marriage, while at the same time preserving the link between Agrippina and her enemy.

II

Tiberius had come to power in A.D. 14 on the death of Augustus, whose funeral day is described by Tacitus as follows:

Die funeris milites uelut praesidio steterē, multum inridentibus qui ipsi uiderant quique a parentibus acceperant diem illum crudi adhuc seruitiū et libertatis improspere repetitae, cum occisus dictator Caesar aliis pessimum, aliis pulcherrimum facinus uideretur. (1.8.6)

The bystanders at the funeral are made to think back to the day of Julius Caesar's assassination,¹² a reflection that allows Tacitus a brief excursion into the now popular realm of 'virtual history'.¹³ His references to slavery and freedom are phrased in such a way as to suggest that Julius Caesar was murdered at just the wrong time: had the assassins struck later, when the implications of political slavery had become more generally recognized, the restoration of freedom might have stood more chance of success.

There can be little doubt that Tacitus has here been influenced by the opening passage of another volume of history. Dealing with the year 509 B.C. at the start of his second book, Livy had observed that Lucius Junius Brutus had struck his blow for freedom at just the right time: had he acted against an earlier king than Tarquinius Superbus, the transition to freedom could not have been sustained, a counter-factual observation which Livy develops at some length:

neque ambigitur quin Brutus idem qui tantum gloriae superbo exacto rege meruit pessimo publico id facturus fuerit, si libertatis immaturae cupidine priorum regum alicui regnum extorsisset. quid enim futurum fuit, si illa pastorum conuenarumque plebs, transfuga ex suis populis, sub tutela iniuolati templi aut libertatem aut certe impunitatem adepta, soluta regio metu agitari coepta esset tribunicis procellis, et in aliena urbe cum patribus serere certamina, priusquam pignera coniugum ac liberorum caritasque ipsius soli, cui longo tempore aduescitur, animos eorum consociasset? dissipatae res nondum adultae discordia forent, quas fouit tranquilla moderatio imperii eoque nutriendo perduxit ut bonam frugem libertatis maturis iam uiribus ferre possent. (2.1.3–6)

The parallel between this earlier Brutus, who banished Tarquin, and his descendant Marcus Junius Brutus, who assassinated Caesar, was of course often made, not least by the later Brutus himself on his coins.¹⁴ If Tacitus' readers realized that they were being invited to see the later transition to freedom, which came too soon, in terms of the earlier, which came at just the right time, the double focus might well have prompted them to reflect that the transition from Augustus to Tiberius was an opportunity which had come too late.

Where Livy had described freedom metaphorically in terms of ripeness and crops (2.1.3 *libertatis immaturae*, 6 *bonam frugem libertatis*), Tacitus qualifies *libertas* by the verb *repetere*. The expression *libertatem repetere* had occurred once in Cicero, three times in Sallust's *Histories* and seven times in Livy, clustering in episodes where

¹² For this point see A. J. Woodman, 'Not a funeral note', *CQ* 52 (2002), 629–32.

¹³ See e.g. N. Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997); R. Cowley, *What If?* (New York, 1999); J. North (ed.), *The Napoleon Options* (London, 2000). Note also Ferguson's *The Pity of War* (London, 1998), and see R. Morello, 'Livy's Alexander digression (9.17–19): counterfactuals and apologetics', *JRS* 92 (2002), 62 and n. 4.

¹⁴ J. D. Evans, *The Art of Persuasion: Political Propaganda from Aeneas to Brutus* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 145–8.

popular rights are at issue,¹⁵ but it then drops out of extant literature until it resurfaces a hundred years later in this passage of Tacitus. Now in Tacitus the expression *libertatis improspere repetitae* constitutes an exact chiasmus with the words *crudi adhuc seruitii*, where the usual explanation of the commentators is that *crudi* is here a metaphor meaning ‘unripe’.¹⁶ On this reading, Tacitus would be applying to slavery a metaphor which Livy had used of freedom in the passage to which Tacitus is alluding. But the matter is rather more complicated than this. Chiasmus is a unifying device, and the unity thereby imposed on the phrases *crudi . . . seruitii* and *libertatis . . . repetitae* suggests that, whatever the metaphor in *crudi*, it is sustained by *repetitae*. For this reason I believe that *crudi* here has its other meaning of ‘undigested’ and that *repetitae* does not mean ‘resought’ (*vel sim.*), as usually translated, but ‘served up again’, as in Juvenal’s famous expression *crambe repetita* (7.154).¹⁷ In other words, the metaphor is one of food.

Although scholars have proved reluctant to believe that Tacitus might have applied such a metaphor to *libertas*, there was in fact an illustrious tradition of seeing freedom in gastronomic terms. When Plato in the *Republic* explained that tyranny arises out of democracy, he said that a democratic community is ‘thirsty for freedom’ and ‘gets drunk on it when undiluted’.¹⁸ Cicero retains this metaphor when he translates the passage in his own *De Republica*,¹⁹ but further on, in a not dissimilar context, he introduces a related metaphor which has no analogue in Plato (2.50): *non satiaris eum [sc. populum] libertate sed incenderis cupiditate libertatis cum tantummodo potestatem gustandi feceris*. Likewise Lucan at the start of his epic on the civil war says that the Romans ‘were not the kind of people . . . to feed on their freedom without resorting to arms’ (1.171–2 *non erat is populus . . . | quem sua libertas immotis pasceret armis*).

Although Tacitus is evidently part of this tradition, it may not be simply coincidence that his reference to freedom in terms of food occurs in the specific context of Julius Caesar’s assassination. The assassins of Caesar issued coins bearing the legend *LIBERTAS* and others depicting Ceres, who was the goddess of corn and protector of the food supply of the Roman people, and who ‘appears on these coins as

¹⁵ Cic. *Phil.* 10.20; Sall. *Hist.* 1.51.1, 1.55.6, 3.48.28 (see p. 179 below); Livy 3.38.10, 3.49.1, 4.53.3 and 10 (these two relate to the ‘Second Secession of the Plebs’), 24.22.5, 35.36.7, 39.25.17.

¹⁶ See e.g. Koestermann or Goodyear ad loc.

¹⁷ H. Furneaux (ad loc.; cf. p. viii) records that this interpretation of *crudi* was proposed by T. F. Dallin, Public Orator at Oxford (1877–80) and a forgotten figure, although he appears as a character in A. E. Housman’s *The Eleventh Eclogue*: see A. Burnett, *The Poems of A. E. Housman* (Oxford, 1997), 230–5 and 525–8. According to *TLL*, which lists 1.8.6 under the meaning *viridis vel recens* (4.1236.14), there is no metaphorical instance of *crudus* = ‘undigested’ before the late fourth century A.D. (4.1235.32–43). But note Quint. 10.1.19 *repetamus autem et retractemus, et, ut cibos mansos ac prope liquefactos demittimus quo facilius digerantur, ita lectio non cruda sed multa iteratione mollita et uelut confecta memoriae imitationique tradatur* (the only other passage in which *crudus* and *repetere* seem to be used in close proximity). I have retained the metaphor in my recent translation of the passage (A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus: the Annals* [Indianapolis/Cambridge, MA, 2004], 7).

¹⁸ *Resp.* 562C–D ὅταν, οἶμαι, δημοκρατουμένη πόλις ἐλευθερίας διψήσασα κακῶν οἰνοχόων προσπατούντων τύχη, καὶ πορρωτέρω τοῦ δέοντος ἀκράτου αὐτῆς μεθυσθῆ . . . Cf. Plut. *Lys.* 13.8 τοὺς Ἑλλήνας ἡδίστου ποτοῦ τῆς ἐλευθερίας γεύσαντες, *Lyc.-Num.* 1.10 τοὺς . . . δούλους ἔγενεσε τιμῆς ἐλευθερίας (see T. E. Duff, *Plutarch’s Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* [Oxford, 1999], 193 for the former); I owe these references to T. Duff.

¹⁹ *Rep.* 1.66 ‘cum’ enim inquit ‘inexplebiles populi fauces exaruerunt libertatis siti malisque usus ille ministris non modice temperatam sed nimis meracem libertatem sitiens hausit . . .’, imitated at Liv. 39.26.7 *uelut ex diutina siti nimis auidē meram haurientes libertatem* (*libertatem haurire* recurs only at Tac. *Hist.* 4.5.2). Cf. also Sen. *Tranq. An.* 17.9.

the patroness of *libertas*.²⁰ The assassins were suggesting that political freedom and the provision of food went hand in hand and that they themselves were the facilitators of both. Such suggestions were part of an ongoing debate, since Caesarian coinage too had previously been associated likewise with both Ceres and *libertas*.²¹ And the conventional nature of the link between freedom and food is clear from the fact that it is severed for effect by Licinius Macer, the populist politician and historian, in a speech that Sallust in his *Histories* puts into his mouth in 73 B.C. Here the aptly named Macer scornfully complains that the people of Rome have exchanged their freedom for the corn dole:²²

nisi forte repentina ista frumentaria lege munia uestra pensantur; qua tamen quinis modis libertatem omnium aestimauere, qui profecto non amplius possunt alimentis carceris. (3.48.19)

The whole theme of Macer's speech is 'freedom', and his last two words (3.48.28) are the same as those used at the start of the *Annals* by Tacitus: *repetere libertatem*.

The link between freedom and food was thus not merely metaphorical but also a feature of political life in the later republic, and it has a highly significant sequel in the year 23 B.C. That was the year in which Augustus assumed the tribunician power, a power that had 'convenient associations, since the tribunes had always been the officers who protected the ordinary people against tyranny'.²³ In the same year there was a crisis in the corn supply, and the emperor entrusted the problem to the young Tiberius, then just beginning his political career. Describing this moment fifty years later, the historian Velleius praised Tiberius' efforts in these terms:

quaestor undeicesimum annum agens capessere coepit rem publicam, maximamque difficultatem annonae ac rei frumentariae inopiam ita Ostiae atque in urbe mandato uitrici moderatus est ut per id quod agebat quantus euasurus esset eluceret. (94.3)

Velleius extrapolates from Tiberius' handling of the corn crisis to his future greatness as emperor long afterwards, yet events in the following year indicate that this is no random exaggeration. Despite the success that Velleius here attributes to Tiberius, there was a further crisis in 22 B.C. and the people of Rome begged Augustus to assume the dictatorship as a means of dealing with it. But he refused, agreeing only to oversee the corn supply, which, as he says in the record of his achievements, 'I so administered that within a few days I freed from its immediate dread and danger the entire community by my expenditure and concern' (*Res Gestae* 5.2 *quam ita administrai ut intra dies paucos metu et periculo praesenti ciuitatem uniuersam liberarem impensa et cura mea*). If the administration of the corn supply could thus 'in some

²⁰ B. S. Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (Austin, 1996), 98–100 (quotation from 100); note too P. A. Brunt, 'Libertas in the Republic', in *The Fall of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1988), 281–350, esp. 346–9; T. P. Wiseman, 'Liber: myth, drama and ideology in Republican Rome', in C. Bruun (ed.), *The Roman Middle Republic: Politics, Religion and Historiography c. 400–133 B.C.* (Rome, 2000), 290–7. For references to Caesar's assassination in terms of a meal see Cic. *Fam.* 10.28.1 *quam uellem ad illas pulcherrimas epulas me Idibus Martiis inuittasses! reliquiarum nihil haberemus*, 12.4.1, Plut. *Caes.* 66.11 *ἅπαντας γὰρ εἶδει κατάρξασθαι καὶ γεύσασθαι τοῦ φόνου*.

²¹ See Spaeth (n. 20), 99; also e.g. S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford, 1971), 139–45 for *libertas*.

²² For Macer see I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (Rome, 1965), 244. Macer's speech is compared with Liv. 4.15.6 (*bilibris farris sperare libertatem se ciuium suorum emisse*) by Ogilvie ad loc.; but the whole episode (4.12.7–16.8) is relevant to the relationship between *annona* and *libertas*. Note also Livy 6.40.12 and Kraus ad loc.

²³ P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Oxford, 1967), 12.

sense be regarded as an alternative to the dictatorship', as Rickman has observed,²⁴ then Velleius' analogy between the handling of the corn supply and the office of emperor seems very much to the point. Moreover, in the light of the language and concepts deployed by the politicians of the late republic, Augustus' choice of the verb *liberare* appears heavy with meaning. The emperor implies that his provision of food can be seen in terms of freedom; but the reality of course is that this is not political freedom but the freedom from want and starvation that can be guaranteed by an autocrat. As Tacitus himself put it mid-way through the incomparable sentence with which he opens the narrative of the *Annals*, Augustus 'enticed the people with corn' (1.2.1 *populum annona . . . pellexit*).²⁵

III

Tiberius' progress towards the greatness predicted for him by Velleius was by no means straightforward. In 6 B.C. Tiberius decided to withdraw from public life altogether and to retire to the island of Rhodes. His mother, Livia, and Augustus were aghast at this decision and tried to dissuade him; but his reaction was to stage a four-day hunger-strike, and his parents were eventually obliged to accept his decision (Suet. *Tib.* 10.2). Tiberius returned from Rhodes in A.D. 2, and twelve years later succeeded Augustus with what Tacitus himself describes as the greatest reluctance (1.10.8–13.5);²⁶ but, despite that reluctance, his performance during his first nine years as emperor was such that Tacitus, exactly half-way through the six books which he devotes to Tiberius, inserts an approving summary of the reign up to A.D. 23, including the emperor's handling of the corn supply:

plebes acri quidem annona fatigabatur, sed nulla in eo culpa ex principe: quin infecunditati terrarum aut asperis maris obuam it quantum impendio diligentiaque poterat. (4.6.4)

The words *impedio diligentiaque* seem to constitute a clear but varied allusion to the words *impensa et cura*, with which Augustus in his *Res Gestae* had referred to his successful resolution of the corn crisis of 22 B.C.²⁷ Yet, although there could be no higher tribute to an emperor who modelled himself on Augustus, Tacitus' reason for inserting his approving summary at precisely this point in the narrative is that the character of Tiberius' reign is about to change for the worse (4.6.1). The year A.D. 23 coincides with the end of the first period of Tiberius' imperial career (above, p. 175), and, by so arranging the narrative that this boundary comes at its mid-way point,

²⁴ G. Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1980), 180.

²⁵ Rickman (n. 24), 62 remarks that from 23 B.C. 'the princeps acknowledged, if not too openly, a continuous ultimate responsibility for the supply of Rome'; and B. Bosworth observes that in the *Res Gestae* Augustus 'lays quite remarkable stress on his subsidies to the grain supply of Rome. The text reads as though he single-handedly supplied subsistence (*frumentationes*) to the urban population' ('Augustus, the *Res Gestae* and Hellenistic theories of apotheosis', *JRS* 89 [1999], 16, where he too notes [n. 100] the choice of the verb *liberare*). For the converse (Clodius' attack on Pompey when the latter was in charge of the corn supply in 56 B.C.) see Cic. *QFr.* 2.3.2 *quis esset qui plebem fame necaret*. For the 'bread and circuses' motif see Juv. 10.81 and Mayor or Courtney ad loc.; for agriculture and the good king see Woodman on Vell. 89.4; and see esp. Pliny, *Pan.* 27.1–3.

²⁶ For this interpretation of 1.10.8–13.5 see Woodman (n. 3), 40–69.

²⁷ The combination of *impensa* and *cura* occurs elsewhere before Tacitus in Livy (24.34.13, 32.34.10, 42.52.11) and Columella (2.12.6, 8.4.6, 8.10.6, 8.15.1), but the context suggests an allusion to the *Res Gestae*.

Tacitus has (as it were) divided his treatment of Tiberius into two ‘acts’, the first comprising Books 1–3 and the second Books 4–6.²⁸

The difference between these two halves of the narrative cannot be better illustrated than by Tiberius’ handling of the two corn crises which Tacitus describes, the first in A.D. 19 in Book 2 (87), the second in A.D. 32 in Book 6 (13):

Annals 2.87

[a] Saeuitiam annonae incusante plebe [b] statuit frumento pretium quod emptor penderet, binosque nummos se additurum negotiatoribus in singulos modios.
[c] neque tamen ob ea parentis patriae delatum et antea uocabulum adsumpsit,
[d] acerbeque increpuit eos qui diuinas occupationes ipsumque dominum dixerant.
[e] unde angusta et lubrica oratio sub principe qui libertatem metuebat, adulationem oderat.

Annals 6.13

[a] Isdem consulibus grauitate annonae iuxta seditionem uentum multaue et pluris per dies in theatro licentius efflagitata quam solitum aduersum imperatorem. [b] quis commotus incusauit magistratus patresque quod non publica auctoritate populum coercuissent [c] addiditque quibus ex prouinciis et quanto maiorem quam Augustus rei frumentariae copiam aduectaret. [d] ita castigandae plebi compositum senatus consultum prisca seueritate neque segnius consules edixere.
[e] silentium ipsius non ciuile, ut crediderat, sed in superbiam accipiebatur.

The first begins with popular complaints about the corn supply [a]; the *princeps* takes emergency action to deal with the crisis [b]; thanks are offered to him on this account [c]; the *princeps* criticizes some of the forms that the thanks have taken [d]; and Tacitus concludes with comments on (i) speaking, (ii) the mutual incomprehension of emperor and people, and (iii) the contrast between freedom and sycophancy [e]. The second crisis, thirteen years later, is structured as a mirror image of the first and is surely intended as its counterpart. It too begins with popular (but more vociferous) complaints about the corn supply [a]; the *princeps*’ immediate reaction is to criticize the magistrates and senate for not controlling the people [b]; he takes no emergency action but refers to measures he is already taking [c]; the people are publicly rebuked by senate and consuls [d]; and Tacitus concludes with comments on (i) silence, (ii) the mutual incomprehension of emperor and people, and (iii) the contrast between civility and arrogance [e]. Neither of these crises is mentioned by any other author, and each occurs exactly five years from respectively the start and end of Tiberius’ reign. Just as Velleius had used the corn crisis of 23 B.C. to gauge Tiberius’ future greatness as *princeps*, so these two episodes involving the corn supply are being presented by Tacitus as an index by which the deterioration in Tiberius’ behaviour may be judged. Yet neither episode is to be seen in isolation; each is part of a larger complex of ideas explored in the two narrative halves of Tiberius’ reign.

IV

To begin his account of the year 19, Tacitus described how Germanicus, nephew and adopted son of the emperor, went to Egypt on a sight-seeing tour which he disguised as a relief mission:

M. Silano L. Norbano consulibus Germanicus Aegyptum proficiscitur cognoscendae antiquitatis. sed cura prouinciae praetendebatur, leuauitque apertis horreis pretia frugum . . . Tiberius . . . acerrime increpuit quod contra instituta Augusti non sponte principis Alexandriam introisset.

(2.59.1–2)

²⁸ This division into two is thus superimposed on, or coexists with, the division into more numerous periods which is proposed in the obituary at 6.51.3 (above, p. 175 and n. 3).

Germanicus could scarcely have chosen a more ill-advised cover-story. As Garnsey has observed, 'Germanicus was not the emperor, but was behaving as one'. Not only did the prince enter, without authority, the very province from which every distinguished politician had been excluded by Augustus *ne fame urgeret Italiam* (2.59.3), but, having gone into Alexandria, he 'proceeded, again on his own initiative, to an act more appropriate to an ambitious pretender than a loyal prince'.²⁹ Germanicus could be seen as insinuating himself into the special relationship between *princeps* and people which since the early days of Augustus' reign had depended on, and was symbolized by, the corn supply. This special relationship is emphasized by Tiberius himself three years later.

Tacitus under A.D. 22 reports that the luxury associated with dining and drinking had reached levels which provoked unease in some quarters (3.52.1). An appropriately named aedile, Bibulus, urged his fellow aediles to remonstrate about the trend, and the senate, when consulted, decided to refer the matter to Tiberius. But Tiberius, in what is the longest speech in the whole of the *Annals*, is made by Tacitus to turn the tables on the senate, saying that he will take no action against luxury since his attention is directed at a far more pressing matter:

quantulum istud est de quo aediles admonent! quam, si cetera respicias, in leui habendum! at hercule nemo refert quod Italia externae opis indiget, quod uita populi Romani per incerta maris et tempestatum cotidie uoluitur! . . . hanc, patres conscripti, curam sustinet princeps; haec omissa funditus rem publicam trahet. (3.54.4–5)

This 'masterly oration', as Syme described it,³⁰ confirms Tiberius' proprietary interest in the corn supply and expounds eloquently the principles that had led him to take special measures to deal with the crisis three years before.³¹

Just before he died, Augustus had had a final exchange of words with the man he had chosen to succeed him, and, when Tiberius had left the room at the end of their conversation, the dying emperor allegedly exclaimed: 'The poor Roman people, to be subjected to such unyielding jaws!' (Suet. *Tib.* 21.2 *miserum populum Romanum, qui sub tam lentis maxillis erit!*). Whether or not the story is true, its purport is that Tiberius would rule as a tyrant: the image of the 'people-eating tyrant' is at least as old as the sixth century B.C.³² Yet Tacitus in the first half of his narrative of Tiberius seems almost to have gone out of his way to prove that fears such as those voiced by Augustus were groundless: so far from devouring his people, Tiberius is above all concerned to see that they have enough to eat.

V

Altogether different is the context in which the later corn crisis appears. A single paragraph (6.14) separates the crisis of 32 from Tacitus' narrative of 33, the year which so interested Sir Ronald Syme. It will be remembered that Tacitus divides his

²⁹ P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 1988), 253.

³⁰ R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 444.

³¹ It is remarkable that Tacitus mentions only twice the man who was *praefectus annonae* throughout Tiberius' principate, 'the indefatigable and almost apocryphal C. Turranius' (R. Syme, *The Provincial at Rome* [Exeter, 1999], 30). At 1.7.2 Turranius swears allegiance to Tiberius immediately after the Praetorian Prefect (a sign, therefore, of his importance); but he does not reappear until the principate of Claudius in A.D. 48 (11.31.1).

³² Theog. 1181 *δημοφάγον . . . τύραννον*. See further Woodman and Martin on 3.17.2, adding e.g. Cic. *De Or.* 1.225, Sil. 1.59–60.

account of that year into two parts, separated by a digression on the art of astrology (above, p. 175); and this digression is introduced by a prophecy from Tiberius that Servius Galba would one day be emperor:

Non omiserim praesagium Tiberii de Seruio Galba tum consule; quem accitum et diuersis sermonibus pertemptatum postremo Graecis uerbis in hanc sententiam adlocutus: 'et tu, Galba, quandoque degustabis imperium', seram ac breuem potentiam significans, scientia Chaldaeorum artis, cuius apiscendae otium apud Rhodum, magistrum Thrasullum habuit, peritiam eius hoc modo expertus. (6.20.2)

Now this prophecy about Galba was evidently well known, since it appears in three other historical writers: Josephus, Suetonius, and Dio. Yet Dio, for whom the form of words is 'You too will one day taste command', places the prophecy a dozen years earlier in A.D. 20 (57.19.4 *καὶ σύ ποτε τῆς ἡγεμονίας γεύσῃ*). Suetonius, for whom the form of words is 'You too, child, will have a bite at my power', places it earlier still, since in his version the prophecy was made, not by Tiberius, but by Augustus (*Galba* 4.1 *καὶ σύ, τέκνον, τῆς ἀρχῆς ἡμῶν παρατρώξῃ*). Evidently the prophecy resembles one of those transferable motifs so common in ancient ethnographical literature.³³ Like Josephus, who merely alludes in passing to the existence of the prophecy (*AJ* 18.6.9), Tacitus could have placed the story anywhere; what would be interesting to know is why he chose to place it in his narrative of the year 33, at what Koestermann called 'the high point of the reign of terror' (above, p. 175).³⁴

Tacitus tells us that Tiberius uttered the prophecy in Greek, the language in which it is found not only in Dio, who of course wrote in Greek, but also in Suetonius, who wrote in Latin;³⁵ and it has been argued that the emperor was adapting a line of Greek verse which had long since become proverbial.³⁶ Indeed the proverb was so well known that, when the dying Julius Caesar said to his assassin Brutus the words '*καὶ σύ, τέκνον*', as he was reported (again by Suetonius and Dio) to have done,³⁷ he needed only to invoke the opening of the same proverbial line for the rest of it to be understood perfectly well. Now it always used to be assumed that Caesar's dying words expressed a combination of surprise and regret when he realized that Brutus of all people was one of his assassins; but it has been argued recently that, if we take into account the unspoken end of the proverb, Caesar was uttering the most bitter of threats. His prediction that at some point Brutus too would taste power was intended

³³ The technical term is 'migratory motifs' (*Wandermotive*): see e.g. J. B. Rives, *Tacitus: Germania* (Oxford, 1999), 56–66.

³⁴ Scholars have emphasized that Tacitus is not saying that the story belongs to the year of Galba's consulship (which is a possible interpretation) but that he tells it now because Galba was consul in that year: see K. Scott, 'Ein Ausspruch des Tiberius an Galba', *Hermes* 67 (1932), 472; G. B. Townend, 'The sources of the Greek in Suetonius', *Hermes* 88 (1960), 114; Ginsburg (n. 6), 75. Syme appears to have come round to a view approaching the latter (compare *Tac.* [n. 30], 525 with *RP* 4, 231).

³⁵ As far as I can discover, there is no parallel anywhere in Latin for *imperium (de)gustare* or similar expressions; but in Greek it occurs at least as early as Hdt. 4.147 *ἐγεύσατο ἀρχῆς*. Cf. also Paus. 4.35.6 *οἱ δὲ Ἰλλυριοί, ἀρχῆς τε γεγευμένοι καὶ ἐπιθυμοῦντες ἀεὶ τοῦ πλείονος . . .* (also below, n. 40).

³⁶ For the argument which follows in this paragraph see P. Arnaud, '“Toi aussi, mon fils, tu mangeras ta part de notre pouvoir”—Brutus le Tyran?', *Latomus* 57 (1998), 61–71. One assumes from the various quotations that the original line of verse would have read (e.g.) *καὶ σύ, τέκνον, ποτε τῆς ἀρχῆς ἡμῶν παρατρώξῃ*.

³⁷ Suet. *Iul.* 82.2, Dio 44.19.5. On the 'formula' *καὶ σύ* in general see also E. Fraenkel, *JRS* 45 (1955), 6 and n. 13.

to mean 'Your turn will come' and was to be understood by Brutus as forecasting that one day he would suffer a violent death similar to that which he was now inflicting upon Caesar.³⁸ Tacitus at the start of the *Annals* had seen Caesar's murder as Brutus' abortive attempt at recovering the taste of freedom (above, pp. 177–8); Caesar himself saw it as sealing Brutus' own fate, which he expressed by the proverbial metaphor of tasting power.

Tiberius' adaptation of the proverb is characteristically apposite. Since we are told by Suetonius that Galba was a notorious glutton (*Galba* 22), the substitution of the vocative 'Galba' for the original 'child' puts into Tiberius' mouth a sardonic underlining of precisely this point, since the name 'Galba' was thought to denote fatness.³⁹ Likewise when Tacitus in his earlier work, the *Histories*, famously described Galba as *omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset* (1.49.4), the epitaph is given extra point by the realisation that *capax*, 'having a capacity for', can be used of a person's capacity for food and drink.⁴⁰

As Tiberius says that Galba 'too' will one day taste command ('*et tu, Galba*'), it follows that Tiberius is seeing his own hold on power in terms of taste. But, for the man who had first retired from public life in 6 B.C. (above, p. 180), who had tried not to succeed Augustus in A.D. 14 (1.10.8–13.5), and who had finally withdrawn to the solitude of Capri in A.D. 26 (4.57.1, 67.1), the taste of power was evidently not one that he himself relished. His remark to Galba is one of commiseration, not congratulation, and his choice of proverb recalls the well-known story of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, in which a similar metaphor occurs. When Dionysius' lifestyle was praised by Damocles, the tyrant said to him (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.61): 'Since this life of mine delights you, Damocles, do you want to taste it yourself [*degustare*] and to experience what it is like to be me?' When Damocles agreed, Dionysius set him in front of a loaded table, but over his head suspended a sword hanging from a horse's hair. Damocles in his terror was unable even to reach out his hand to the table; and, even if he had succeeded in doing so, he would no doubt have found, as was proverbial, that the food of tyrants has a bitter taste.⁴¹

Yet there was one taste which tyrants were supposed to acquire, and there can be no doubt that Tiberius is being depicted as a tyrant. Earlier in Book 6 (6.1–2), Tacitus had quoted a letter of Tiberius and had drawn from it the conclusion that he was the type of self-tormented tyrant defined by Plato,⁴² according to whom a tyrant's evil behaviour means that blows are inflicted on his mind in the same way that a person's body might be mauled by lashings (*si recludantur tyrannorum mentes, posse aspici laniatus et ictus, quando, ut corpora uerberibus, ita saeuitia, libidine, malis consultiis*

³⁸ The tradition of Caesar's prophetic threat must post-date Brutus' death at Philippi in 42 B.C. Arnaud (n. 36), in addition to the interpretation mentioned here (70), also suggests that Caesar's words accuse Brutus himself of tyranny (69); these two interpretations are not of course incompatible.

³⁹ See R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds, 1991), 252, listing also a rival etymology of thinness.

⁴⁰ Livy 9.16.13 *cibi uinique . . . capacissimum*; Sen. *Ep.* 83.24; Plin. *NH* 24.35. R. Ash has pointed out to me that in Plutarch, when Nymphidius Sabinus tries to get the soldiers to dictate to Galba, they are reluctant to treat him 'like a youth just tasting power' (*Galba* 13.4 *γευόμενον ἐξουσίας*).

⁴¹ The standard reference is Hor. *Carm.* 3.1.18–19 *non Siculae dapes | dulcem elaborabunt saporem*; there is perhaps a similar implication at Xen. *Hiero* 1.21–3.

⁴² It has been argued that Tacitus' reference to Plato was prompted by a misinterpretation of the emperor's letter (B. M. Levick, 'A cry from the heart from Tiberius Caesar?', *Historia* 27 [1978], 95–101), but it is the interpretation itself, whether right or wrong, that concerns us.

animus dilaceretur); and another feature of the Platonic tyrant is that he acquires a taste for the flesh and blood of his fellow men and is transformed into a man-eating wolf.⁴³ Suetonius preserves some anonymous popular verses about Tiberius, one of which runs as follows:

fastidit unum quia iam sitit iste cruorem;
tam bibit hunc auide quam bibit ante merum. (Tib. 59.1–2)

If Tiberius is not here grinding people with his jaws, as Augustus had predicted, at least he is drinking their blood. Tiberius' initial reaction to such verses, continues Suetonius, was to say 'Let them hate, provided they approve' (*oderint, dum probent*). These words are so phrased as to constitute an unmistakable allusion to a famous line of the early playwright Accius: 'Let them hate, provided they dread' (*oderint, dum metuant*).⁴⁴ Since in the play these words are spoken by Atreus, Tiberius is grimly echoing the character who as an act of revenge served up for his brother Thyestes the flesh of Thyestes' own sons. Later, concludes Suetonius, Tiberius made the verses come true; and no better evidence of this can be found than Tacitus' account of the year 33 in the *Annals*. Just as Book 6 as a whole has over three times as many violent deaths of named persons as do Books 1–4 put together, so the year 33 has more than any other year in Book 6.

The sequence of named deaths that follows the digression on astrology begins with Asinius Gallus, a distinguished ex-consul and long-standing antagonist of Tiberius (6.23.1): 'that he had perished from a lack of food was not in doubt', says Tacitus, 'but whether voluntarily or by necessity was regarded as uncertain'. Gallus' death is itself followed by that of Tiberius' grandson, Drusus Caesar, which is described at some length (23.2–24.3). Tacitus begins by saying that Drusus died despite keeping himself alive for nine days by eating the stuffing from his bed, 'pitiable nourishment' (23.2 *miserandis alimentis*).⁴⁵ This statement is succeeded by events in the senate, where the appalled members listen to the recitation of Tiberius' attack on his dead grandson and to the reports of the abuse and spying to which the young man had been subjected right up to the day of his death (24.1–2). The senators were terrified and astonished at Tiberius' confidence (24.3): *penetrabat pauor et admiratio, callidum olim et tegendis sceleribus obscurum huc confidentiae uenisse ut tamquam dimotis parietibus ostenderet nepotem sub uerbere centurionis, inter seruorum ictus extrema uitae alimenta frustra orantem*. Tiberius' revelation by letter of the physical lashings and blows which Drusus had suffered (*uerbere . . . ictus*) recalls his earlier revelation, also by letter, of

⁴³ See Pl. *Grq.* 524E for self-torment and *Resp.* 562A–580B for the features of the typical tyrant (65D–566A for the transformation into a wolf). For discussion see e.g. G. O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 74–103 ('The motif of the tyrant') and esp. M. Leigh, 'Varius Rufus, Thyestes and the appetites of Antony', *PCPS* 42 (1996), 171–97; also below, n. 55. For the wolf in particular note C. Mainoldi, *L'Image du chien et du loup dans la Grèce ancienne d'Homère à Platon* (Paris, 1984), 193–4. The very first fable of Phaedrus, a contemporary of Tiberius, concerns the story of a wolf which devours an innocent lamb: Phaedrus says the fable is allegorical, but it is unclear whether the wolf represents Tiberius or Sejanus, with whom Phaedrus evidently clashed (3 *prol.* 41–4) and who was described by Seneca as a wolf (*Cons. Marc.* 22.7). Interestingly, Seneca also described the dead Sejanus as being devoured by his fellow citizens (*Tranq. An.* 11.11). For Seneca's images see below, n. 59.

⁴⁴ Acc. fr. 204R³ = 168W = 47D.

⁴⁵ The detail of the 'ninth day' is perhaps an ironical allusion to the Roman ritual of the funeral feast, which was held on the ninth day after a person's death and to which Tacitus has already referred a little earlier in Book 6 (5.1).

the mental blows from which, as if from bodily lashings, he was suffering himself (6.6.1–2 *ictus . . . uerberibus*: above, p. 184), a parallelism between the two men which will recur finally, and vindictively, at the very end of the emperor's life (p. 189). Tiberius' revelation is made all the more dramatic by an allusion to the technology of drama. The phrase *tamquam dimotis parietibus* suggests those moments in Senecan tragedy where references to the opening of buildings precede interior scenes of grimness or horror, such as Phaedra lying on her bed of sickness, Hercules' child addressing in vain his maddened father, or Thyestes glutted after eating his children.⁴⁶ Here the stage mechanism reveals Tiberius' grandson 'begging in vain for the final nourishments of life', thereby making explicit at the end of the episode what was only implied at the start, namely that Drusus was starved to death, deprived even of the meagre prison nourishment mentioned by Macer in the *Histories* of Sallust (above, p. 179).

Nondum is dolor exoleuerat, continues Tacitus smoothly (25.1),⁴⁷ *cum de Agrippina auditum*. Whereas her son had kept himself alive by chewing the stuffing from his bed, she kept herself alive by the metaphorical sustenance of hope (*spe sustentatam*); but, when she realized that the execution of Sejanus was not to be followed by any remission of savagery, she 'extinguished herself voluntarily—unless by the denial of nourishment her end was made to resemble one which seemed to have been chosen spontaneously'.⁴⁸ As with her son, Tiberius took advantage of the death to inveigh against the deceased (25.2), and it was not long after this, says Tacitus, that Cocceius Nerva decided to commit suicide (26.1). He had been the 'constant companion of the princeps', who was horrified at his old friend's decision and warned him that it would reflect badly on himself. But Nerva's mind was made up, and he starved himself to death (26.2).

The deaths of these four named persons—Asinius Gallus, Drusus Caesar, Agrippina, and Cocceius Nerva—are the four central deaths of the year 33.⁴⁹ The first three of them are explicitly linked by Tacitus: Agrippina and Drusus are both described as relatives of Tiberius (23.2 *nuru ac nepoti*, cf. 24.1 *auum, 3 nepotem*), and Agrippina and Asinius Gallus, who had married Tiberius' ex-wife (1.12.4), are accused of having had an adulterous liaison (25.2). But between these three and Cocceius Nerva there is of course a further link, not expressed but obvious: all of them died of starvation.

⁴⁶ Seneca's language changes from play to play (*Phaedr.* 384 *patescunt regiae fastigia, Thy.* 901–8 *fores | templi relaxa, festa patefiat domus. | . . . aperta multa tecta conlucent face*) or is the subject of editorial dispute (at *HF* 999–1001 *huc eat et illuc ualua* [Baden: *claua* Withof: *aula* EA] *deiecto obice | rumpatque postes; culmen impulsum labet. | perlucet omnis regia*, Fitch favours *ualua* and Billerbeck *claua*): it therefore seems impossible to know whether he had in mind the production of an *exostra* from an opened door (so D. F. Sutton, *Seneca on the Stage* [Leiden, 1986], 18; J. G. Fitch, 'Playing Seneca?', in G. W. M. Harrison (ed.), *Seneca in Performance* [London, 2000], 3 and 7) or the parting or removal of a back-drop or set to reveal a new scene (one of the interpretations offered for Verg. *G.* 3.24–5 by Servius: see R. C. Beacham, *The Roman Theatre and its Audience* [London, 1991], 169–73). *dimouere* can mean 'to open' as well as 'to move apart/aside' (*TLL* 5.1.1218.47–8), but *paries* seems never to be used of a door. Of course, if Seneca's plays were intended for recitation rather than actual performance, that would in a sense strengthen the parallel between the two authors.

⁴⁷ The transition is smooth but the means of effecting it (*nondum* + inverted *cum*) surprisingly rare (J.-P. Chausserie-Laprée, *L'Expression narrative chez les historiens latins* [Paris, 1969], 574).

⁴⁸ 6.25.1 *uoluntate exstinctam, nisi si negatis alimentis adsimulatus est finis qui uideretur sponte sumptus*.

⁴⁹ Four deaths precede (Considius Proculus, the father and brother of Pompeia Macrina, and Sex. Marius) and four follow (Munatia Plancina, Aelius Lamia, Pomponius Flaccus, and M. Lepidus).

Moreover, there is no corresponding link in Dio. Although Dio records each of these deaths, only those of Drusus and Agrippina are juxtaposed (58.22.4–5); and, whereas their two deaths are placed in the middle of the year, that of Nerva is placed towards the beginning (58.21.4–5) and that of Asinius Gallus at the very end (58.23.6). Since Dio had already referred to the impoverished rations which Asinius Gallus was forced to endure in the later stages of his life (58.3.5–6), it is very striking that he fails to mention starvation as the cause of Gallus' death; yet in fact Dio makes no reference at all to starvation in any of these cases except that of Cocceius Nerva, whose suicide he describes quite differently from the way it appears in Tacitus.

Suicide by starvation, being relatively rare and designed to attract attention, was usually a means of making a point.⁵⁰ Dio alleges that Nerva's chief reason for starving himself to death was to protest against some financial measures that Tiberius had introduced, a connection which seems trivializing in the extreme: 'most detrimental', in the words of Syme.⁵¹ Tacitus, by contrast, describes a scene in which Nerva's decision to die does indeed attract attention, of no less a person than the *princeps* himself, who visits his old friend to question and plead with him (26.1 *adsidere, causas requirere, addere preces*); but he is met with silence and continued starvation (26.2 *aversatus sermonem Nerua abstinentiam cibi coniunxit*).⁵² Nerva's silence in the face of Tiberius' remonstrances invites the obvious inference that the responsibility for his suicide lies with Tiberius himself; and the verb with which Tacitus has expressed his abstinence from food, *coniunxit*, almost suggests that Nerva has deliberately 'joined his starvation' to that of Gallus, Drusus, and Agrippina, and hence that this 'closest of the friends' of the *princeps* has chosen the same manner of death as a protest against theirs.⁵³

On this interpretation, Nerva's death took inevitable precedence over the suicide of Munatia Plancina which follows; and the sequence of four identical deaths as the centrepiece of the year's narrative gives to them a cumulative significance which each might not have possessed on its own. Tiberius, whose very first political act nearly sixty years previously had been to resolve a food crisis and who in the early years of his reign had prided himself on, and jealously defended, his responsibility for keeping his citizens fed, is now variously enforcing starvation on foes, relatives, and friends alike. To such an extent has he degenerated even from the indifference which he displayed during the corn crisis of the previous year (p. 181). Moreover, though the sequence of starvation is immediately preceded by the digression on the art of astrology, as we have seen (p. 185), the transition from the digression to the first death in the sequence is managed by a series of linguistic and conceptual correspondences

⁵⁰ A. J. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-killing in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1990), 40–6. In the *Annals* there has been only one previous suicide by starvation: Cremutius Cordus in A.D. 25 (4.35.4).

⁵¹ *RP* 4, 229. Dio's account is taken at face value by V. E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting* (London, 1996), 57.

⁵² Compare the scenes at *Nep. Att.* 22.1–2 and *Pliny Ep.* 1.12, where Atticus and Corellius Rufus respectively are begged not to starve themselves to death. These men were of course gravely ill, whereas Tacitus goes out of his way to say that Nerva was healthy (26.1 *corpore inlaeso*); and Rufus' previous determination to outlive Domitian is the opposite stance to that taken by Nerva. I owe these comparisons to A. Melchior and M. Griffin.

⁵³ Compare Isocrates' starving himself to death after hearing of the loss of Greek freedom at Chaeronea (*Vita Isocratis* 153–60 M-B = Wehrli F 154); I owe this reference to J. Dillery. Since Tacitus regularly uses *coniungere* of joining together narrative topics of a similar nature (e.g. 4.33.3, 6.38.1, 12.40.5, 13.9.3), it is tempting to suggest that there may also be a metatextual meaning here: Nerva 'continued the <narrative of> starvation'.

by which Tacitus seems to encourage our seeing a connection between Gallus' death and Tiberius' prophecy about Galba⁵⁴—a prophecy whose recording under this year was Tacitus' deliberate choice in the first place (p. 183). However odious Tiberius found the power which he described to Galba in terms of taste, it was by virtue of that power that he denied any taste at all to his next set of victims. The logic of the narrative suggests the vindictiveness of the tyrant, whose response to the metaphor of his own life is to inflict on others the reality of a talionic death; and it is diagnostic of the surrealism of tyranny that those whom Tiberius starves to death are among the victims on whom he is popularly said to feed.

VI

The relationship that Tacitus has constructed between the imperial palate and Tiberius' starving victims continues to resurface in the narrative until the very end of the emperor's reign. In the following year, Tacitus tells us, Mamerus Scaurus was accused (among other things) of having written a tragedy with verses added to it which could be interpreted as an attack on Tiberius (6.29.3–4). Since the theme of Atreus and Thyestes had become 'established as the fundamental paradigm for anti-tyrannical discourse in tragedy', as Leigh has recently remarked,⁵⁵ Tacitus perhaps felt it would be pedantic to explain that Scaurus' play was entitled *Atreus*, a detail that we owe to Dio (58.24.4). Likewise, but conversely, when Vibius Marsus in 37 was accused in circumstances even more dubious than was common at those times (6.47.2–3), he was able to survive by the simple expedient of pretending to starve himself to death (6.48.1).

It was in March of the same year that Tiberius himself died, and, in the light of the foregoing narrative, Tacitus' elaborate description of his death perhaps acquires some additional significance. Alone of our sources, Tacitus (6.50.1–2) sets the scene at a banquet which took place in a villa once owned by Lucullus, whose reputation as Rome's greatest giver of dinners was proverbial.⁵⁶ The *princeps* was visibly failing, but his entourage had no idea of how much longer he had to live and they were anxious to find out. Therefore a doctor named Charicles, pretending to be about to depart on a journey, grasped the emperor's hand in a show of respect but in reality attempting to take his pulse (6.50.2).⁵⁷ But, as Tacitus tells us, the master of deception was not himself deceived (50.3): *nam Tiberius, incertum an offensus tantoque magis iram premens, instaurari epulas iubet discumbitque ultra solitum, quasi honori abeuntis amici tribueret*. The man whose determination to withdraw from public life more than forty years previously had been backed up by a hunger-strike, and who as emperor had described his hold on power by the metaphor of taste, was now capitalizing on a banquet to prove his hold on life. 'In the case of life', Cicero had said, 'one should observe the rule which obtains at Greek parties: *aut bibat . . . aut abeat*, "Let him quaff or quit"' (*Tusc.* 5.118). Unlike other great men whose banqueting habits are

⁵⁴ 6.20.2 (a) *Thrasyllum*, (b) *praesagium*, (c) *imperium*, (d) *non omiserim*, (e) *consule*, (f) *degustabis* ~ 22.4–23.1 (a) *Thrasylli*, (b) *praedictum*, (c) *imperium*, (d) *ne nunc incepto longius abierim*, (e) *consulibus*, (f) *egestate cibi*.

⁵⁵ Leigh (n. 43), 187.

⁵⁶ Dio (58.28) has neither banquet nor Lucullus' villa; Suetonius (*Tib.* 72.2–73.2) has both, but entirely separates the banquet (72.3) from Lucullus' villa, in which Tiberius dies (73.1).

⁵⁷ In Suetonius (72.3) Charicles is genuinely departing on a journey and it is Tiberius who mistakenly thinks that the doctor is trying to take his pulse: thus Suetonius' scene entirely lacks the menace of Tacitus'.

used as an index of their behaviour,⁵⁸ Tiberius—typically and (it seems) uniquely—literalized the metaphor of life as a banquet.⁵⁹

Yet the doctor had succeeded in taking his pulse, and he assured Macro, the emperor's current henchman, that Tiberius would not last more than two days. Arrangements were duly made, and on 16 March Tiberius lapsed into unconsciousness and was believed to have died (6.50.4). His successor, Gaius, accompanied by a throng of well-wishers, was just emerging to assume control of the empire when news was suddenly brought that Tiberius had regained consciousness and, in what seems like a grotesque action-replay of the banqueting scene immediately before, was demanding food. But this time his calls for food went as unanswered as those of his grandson Drusus four years before (above, pp. 185–6).

VII

John Clive, the distinguished expert on Lord Macaulay, once asked whether 'historians . . . have to possess a special metaphorical capacity, a plastic or tactile imagination that can detect shapes and configurations where others less gifted see only jumble and confusion'.⁶⁰ When Sir Ronald Syme compared the accounts of the year 33 in Tacitus and Dio, he observed it as a general rule that an author 'had licence to select and arrange, in accordance with his taste and purpose, supplying, if he had the requisite skill, some links or explanations'.⁶¹ In the case of Dio, Syme produced examples which testified to the deficiencies of that author; but, when he turned to Tacitus, another annalistic historian to whom fell 'the function and duty of bringing out value and significance', he singled out his 'skill . . . in coherence and transition'.⁶² One aspect of that skill is his 'special metaphorical capacity', which in the year 33 saw Tacitus exploring the tyrannical implications of Tiberius' tasting power.

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⁵⁸ For this see e.g. Pliny, *Pan.* 49.5–7; R. Ash, *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories* (London, 1999), 96–105, with further references.

⁵⁹ For this metaphor see Brink on Hor. *Epist.* 2, Appendix 20; R. B. Rutherford, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (Oxford, 1989), 147 and n. 54; M. Armisen-Marchetti, *Sapientiae facies: étude sur les images de Sénèque* (Paris, 1989), s.v. 'nourriture'.

⁶⁰ J. Clive, *Not by Fact Alone* (London, 1989), 200.

⁶¹ *RP* 4, 229.

⁶² *RP* 4, 235.