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## Reliance and self-transcendence in Tacitus' work. Some perspectives

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### Abstract

Showing a deep perception of the human soul, which never lets itself explored and revealed with more power and accuracy than in times of danger, Tacitus proves to be a molder of consciences. The historian's role is that of facilitating our self-transcendence. This idea marks Tacitus's work, as he was obsessed with the mechanisms that lead to the degradation of the human being and of society, but also with the means through which original harmony may be re-established.

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The fragmentation created within the world of knowledge by the amazing development of sciences has led, apparently in a disconcerting way, to a genuine mangling of the human being itself, although nowadays more than ever we should be aware of the antinomic complexity which the highest knowledge is made of. That is why the concept of reliance, coined by the sociologist Marcel Bolle de Bal [1], confirms and strongly brings back into discussion precisely the need to re-find, restructure and re-establish the complex unity of the world. It brings together in its semantic texture the uncovering of fragmented structures and the revealing of actions that aim to recreate broken connections. Yet, in this train of thought, with relatively few exceptions of present-day literature, nowhere else than in the classical Greek-Latin literature can we find the integrating vision of knowledge made up of interwoven paths.

The archaeology of the Roman historian Tacitus' complex work – seen both horizontally (the varied but fully convergent papers that make up his entire work) and vertically (the levels of ideological construction in a piece of writing, together with their stylistics) – highlight this integrating perspective. The gnoseological, axiological and ontological levels are reunited in Tacitus' work, all highlighted by a proficient artistic style, i.e. perfectly

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adequate to the ideological construction. Above all else, literature is an art of the soul and of the conscience, an art of knowledge and of life and, consequently, the space where reason and emotion, the gnoseological and the aesthetical are harmoniously intertwined. The blurriness of the boundary between them, their fusion into a perfect whole is only one of the trademarks of Tacitus's writing. The open unity of knowledge and life is present in various degrees throughout his works.

Showing a deep perception of the human soul – which never lets itself explored and revealed with more power and accuracy than in times of danger – the varied work of Tacitus steps out of its narrow socio-political frame. It speaks to us from beyond its real timeframe, because it is well known that, in the universe of Reality, the real represents only one of the various dimensions. In turn, metamorphosing right in front of our eyes into a biographer, an anthropologist, a literary theoretician and aesthetician, a psychologist, a sociologist, or a political scientist, Tacitus proves to be a painter of the Roman world and, at the same time, very subtly - yet emblematically – a mold of consciences. Above all a writer, in the full sense of the word, he thus provides us with the complex image of the creator. Passions, doubts, aspirations, failures, acts of meanness or cruelty and, in a troubling dichotomy, a heart-wrenching and discrete affection, they are all meant to make us co-participants in his world, in the sense of our involvement and especially of our transformation,

“quia pauci prudentia honesta ab deterioribus, utilia ab noxiis discernunt, plures aliorum eventis docentur” [2].

With its typical gnoseological force, genuine literature establishes a true mechanism for building an existence lived righteously, responsible for itself only inasmuch and as long as it is responsible for another crucial and complex concept of the human being (“on Roman coins under even the most despotic emperors” [3]), our liberty becomes consistent only when it is not limited to the individual, but through him, and thanks to him, it gradually gains more consciences. In a time when Rome returns to dictatorship, Cicero, first a savior and later an outlaw of his motherland, prophetically stated: “concordi populo et omnia referente ad incolumitatem et ad libertatem suam nihil esse inmutabilius, nihil firmitus” [4]. Juxtaposing the harmony of liberty with individualizing perspectives and justice, the Roman thinker refuses, in *De republica*, to identify the accomplishment of this desideratum with the warm compromise or the evening submissiveness. A leitmotif of Tacitus's work, liberty is, for the new generation – as we are told from the very first book of the *Annals* – a word devoid of palpable consistency, especially known from the stories that evoke past liberties.

The degradation of community ideals, the gradual intensification of egotistic instincts, and the prevalence of individual over civil interests mark the road of Roman decadence. “Superbus ac publicii servitii victor” [2], in an upside-down world, an un-world, the noble practical ideal transforms at one's whim into *princeps legibus* or it allows one everything against anybody else. From the numerous examples, I shall only give one, namely the episode of Britannicus' murder:

“Trepidatur a circumsedentibus: diffugiunt imprudentes; at quibus altior intellectus, resistant defixi et Neronem intuentes” [2].

The extreme conciseness of the narrative testifies to a surgical precision, but also to a singular understanding of what it means to be human in all its complexity. Hiding one's feelings, being duplicitous are major signs of the catastrophic decadence of the Roman society, which was once guided by the creed *virtus, fides, pietas*. Furthermore, dissimulation becomes a complex criterion in the evaluation of society. The dissolution of the state may be regarded in this case only by studying the way it manifests itself. Thus, as long as the ones who still hold power resort to such dissimulation, tyranny is not absolute. For example, in the same episode of Britannicus's death, there is Nero who shows an image of innocence even if nobody has any doubts over the murder motives and the instigator: “Ille, ut erat reclinis et nescio similis, solitum ita ait per comitalem morbum” [2]; or, the episode with the Agrippina [2]. Continuously practiced, dissimulation imposes itself as *altera natura*, a means of survival, by taking the shape, paradoxical though it is, of the dissimulation of virtues:

“Caecina et primoribus partium iam Vitellium aspernantibus ambitus abnuere perseveravit. Sanctus, inturbidus, nullius repentini honoris, adeo non principatus adpetens, parum effugerat ne dignus crederetur” [5].

In this existential universe, the defeated are paradoxically the real winners, in the atemporal order of the world. The over-quoted example is that of Paetus Thrasea – because “Nero virtutem ipsam excindere concupivit, interfecto Thrasea Paeto” [2], but in times poisoned by the havoc of extreme egotism and decadence, such parables are few and far between (“Libertas Thraseae servitium aliorum rupit” [2]). They now have the power to retain the grain of hope, no matter how frail it might be. The writer’s strong emotional involvement, which counterbalances the principle of the historian’s objectivity, together with the unsettling existential tension of the heroes themselves, confer the Roman writer’s literature the trademarks of a heart-wrenching pathos, able to shake up numb consciences:

“Atque interim Nero, recordatus Volusii Proculi indicio Epicharim attineri, ratusque muliebri corpore impari dolori, tormentis dilacerari iubet. At illam non verbera, non ignes, non ira eo acrius torquentium, ne a femina spernerentur, pervicere quin obiecta denegaret. Sic primus quaestionis dies contemptus. Postero, quum ad eosdem cruciatus retraheretur gestamine sellae (nam dissolutis membris insistere nequibat), vinclo fasciae, quam pectori detraxerat, in modum laquei ad arcum sellae restricto, indidit cervicem, et corporis pondere connisa tenuem iam spiritum expressit, clariore exemplo libertina mulier, in tanta necessitate alienos ac prope ignotos protegendo, quum ingenui et viri et equites Romani senatoresque, intacti tormentis, carissima suorum quisque pignorum proderent” [2].

For Tacitus, the practical dimensions of existence must be placed together with the spiritual ones in the service of the City, one’s own life finding firm ground only if it is built on generosity, in its uncountable sense. Moreover, life itself is valuable only as long as one acts toward one’s own ascension. But this is the mark of our liberty. In their dialogue of *Les racines de la liberté*, Basarab Nicolescu and Michel Camus ascertain the fact that the human being is not only involved in a social construction of reality, but his role is also to simultaneously find and confer meaning to reality [6]. Basarab Nicolescu had already developed this perspective in his *La transdisciplinarité*. Inner revolution – argues the philosopher – transforms our individual life and our social life into an act which is both esthetical and ethical: the revealing of the poetic dimension of existence [7]; an agonizing existence, I would like to add, in which identity is permanently built through alterity in a relentlessly ascending endeavor. This idea, very topical in its theoretical implications, is not, however, new with regard to conscience, as we can see with Tacitus himself. This addition comes evidently across in *Histories and Annals*, but it is also discretely felt in the other works as well.

Envisaging, *avant la lettre*, a transdisciplinary approach to reality, the Roman writer’s work lies on the solid fundamentals of spirituality, despite the apparent surface image of fitful humankind. In an extremely vivid description, Tacitus raises the citizens’ awareness – through the subjacent opposition of the Roman-Germanic antinomy – that the Germanic tribes, which were looked down on, are, on the contrary, an example of virtues and traditions they have remained loyal to [8]. Humankind’s old age – as the historian incisively points out – must simultaneously be the spring and the repository of our virtues and ideals. In this way, we do not look on the past as an ideal far-away and intangible realm, but as the source – the incentive for our own victories. Otherwise, breaking with the past would eventually mean amputating a defining dimension of the human being. One’s most durable actuality imperatively requires the assimilation of one’s predecessors. Moving forward means going back, for there is no genuine advancement if one does not look with one eye towards the past. At the same time, the dialectic of existence has us, in turn, become a model for those who would follow – a dimension meant to hold us doubly responsible; “nec omnia apud priores meliora, sed nostra quoque aetas multa laudis et atrium imitanda posteris tulit. Verum haec nobis in maiores certamina ex honesto maneat” [2]. But, as we can see owing to Tacitus’ discourse, this only occurs in times of high morals. Otherwise, natural qualities in times of existential righteousness turn into true acts of heroism in the middle of a deeply decadent society, in these times of no values or whimsical decisions:

“Non tamen adeo virtutum sterile seculum, ut non et bona exempla prodiderit. Comitatae profugos liberos matres, secutae maritos in exilia coniuges; propinqui audentes, constantes generi, contumax etiam adversus tormenta servorum fides, suprema clarorum virorum necessitate, ipsa necessitas fortiter tolerata et laudatis antiquorum mortibus pares exitus” [5].

Exemplary deeds, which shine over centuries and worlds, have transformed a gathering of poor huts, scattered over the hills of Latium, into the greatest city of that world. Cincinnatus, Mucius Scaevola, Horatii, the first consul, Brutus, they are all benchmarks of moral excellence, genuine role models of the Roman world. Through their actions, these brave Romans superlatively manifested their ethical conscience, their virtue, an emblematic quality for *illa Roma antiqua*. A gradually fading characteristic, virtue becomes “*rara avis in terris et simillima cyano*” [9] in the time of another great satirist, Juvenal, who lived in the other ‘time’ of Rome.

Making the history of the City, *virtus* eventually metamorphoses into a meaningless word. With a goldsmith’s finesse, the historian looks into the reasons that lead to schisms and spiritual degeneration. The unpredictable windings, the oscillations from one extreme to another are captured with unique vigor; but what truly becomes the writer’s trademark is precisely the overcoming of these sequential elements towards envisaging a convulsive humankind, whose benchmarks – never completely lost – are strongly shadowed by a dense texture of disintegrating egotistic impulses:

“simul veritas pluribus modis infracta, primum insecitia rei publicae ut alienae, mox libidine assentandi aut rursus odio adversus dominantes: ita neutris cura posteritatis inter infensos vel obnoxios. [...] Atrocibus in urbe saevitum: nobilitas, opes, omissi gestique honores pro crimine et ob virtutes certissimum exitium. Nec minus praemia delatorum invisam quam scelera, cum alii sacerdotia et consulatus ut spolia adepti, procuraciones alii et interiorem potentiam, agerent, verterent cuncta odio et terrore. Corrupti in domino servi, in patronos liberti; et quibus deerat inimicus per amicos oppressi” [5].

The general dissolution of society lends the writer a tone of deep melancholy, remarked upon by the researchers into his works. In such a context, the text’s conciseness and stylistic simplicity acquire the force of trans-temporal formulations. Dramatically for him, the writer, a visionary thinker, transcends his work, being the contemporary of each and every generation. Genuine suffering builds in us, dichotomistically, a dramatic and always exemplary capacity to affectionately embrace our neighbor. Genuine suffering, devastating and definitive, is discrete and quiet; it moves away from the individual and gradually becomes man’s suffering. Highly articulated in its diversity, Tacitus’s work becomes, on one hand, the history of man, a warning against the reasons that lead to decadence, against always lurking dangers, and on the other, an incentive to cultivate virtues, a way to the long hoped for happiness. As the human being’s evolution means the evolution of his conscience, his supreme responsibility – the historian keeps warning us – is to choose to collaborate in this dynamic structure. If Tacitus was rightfully reproached for his cynicism, namely a cruelly realistic perspective here, too little imbued by the good that should live inside the human being, we have to notice at the same time that this cynicism – not cruelty, meanness or contempt – finally puts forward a soteriologic solution. Paradoxically, for one to retain at least a grain of hope, one must hold within extreme desperation, lack of any hope, or absolute un-hope.

Such major signs are strikingly recognizable in the Roman writer’s work, “*quod praecipuum munus annalium reor, ne virtutes sileantur, utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit*” [2]. We are reminded in a troubling, but all the more durable way, of the right and safe path to the humankind we constantly hope for. As obligatory sources of individual welfare, the brave Romans cheered the welfare of the City and of others –

“*Commoda praeterea patriae prima putare./ Deinde parentum, tertia iam postremaque nostra*” [10]; individual welfare is the reward of those who always think and practice community welfare: “*ut maioribus meis dignum, rerum vestrarum providum, constantem in periculis, offensionum pro utilitate publica non pavidum credant. Haec mihi in animis vestris templa, hae pulcherrimae effigies et mensurae*” [2].

This dichotomist view of life, finely outlined, brings in front of our eyes the panorama of humankind that opens itself towards the humankind we have always known.

In the foreword to his book *Histoire de Rome*, Jean-Yves Boriaud quotes, in an apparently disconcerting manner, Freud, who often used to dream of Rome, the eternal city where “rien de ce qui se produit ne se serait perdu et où toutes les phases récentes de son développement subsisteraient encore à côté des anciennes” [11]. Here, we are given not only an image of how we should look at Rome, but also of the meanings of our own existence. The lesson of the Roman world compels us to regard the facts in their development, to bind together the various planes, to take over and to transmit what has been accepted as good, true and beautiful. We are links in a continuous becoming, as Marcus Aurelius, the emperor-philosopher himself pondered. Thus, we truly mean something if we know that, by preserving what is valuable we can reorganize and renew our cosmos in accordance with the atemporal order of the universe. This sovereign idea marks Tacitus’ work, as he was obsessed with the mechanisms that lead to the degradation of the human being and of society, but also with the means through which original harmony may be re-established. His deeply pessimistic nature does not elude a certain soteriological perspective. His destiny in this rebellious world testifies to the need of truth(s), coherence and convergence of principles and actions, customs and thinking. As an opportunity of opening towards meaningfulness, we are left with the hope of a new Babel where the intertwined values – just as Tudor Vianu infers in his *Studii de filosofia culturii* [12] – would participate in a new and genuine onto-cognitive, transcendental and trans-temporal unity. In its deep wholeness, the human being is the placeless place of the trans-cultural and trans-religious, moving away from the manichaeic attitudes of various ideologies and transgressing any dogma on a perfectly agglutinated trajectory.

Yet, an unspoken, strange tendency of alienation still abstracts the modern researcher from the complex and convergent perspective over the integrating elements of our becoming. The complete alliance between the planes of our preoccupations and the manifestations of our lives imposes itself as a straight and safe way towards the humanity we constantly hope for: harmonious in its dissonances, unitary in its diversity, convergent despite its divergences. “If the term ‘humankind’ were to mean something, it is that, despite all differences and oppositions existing among its various forms, they all act ultimately for a common purpose” [13], observed Ernst Cassirer. Humanism – which bloomed in the Roman world, was transfigured once Christianity appeared and is today glorified in trans-humanism – succeeds in making us witnesses of the revolution established in the conscience.

Reading Tacitus’ work proves to be a twofold action of understanding: a striking insight into the Roman world, but also a reading of the self. On two distinct but convergent levels, the movement from one work to another outlines a dynamic of meaning and a complete enlightenment of the two interwoven universes.

“Je ne sache point d’auteur qui mêle un registre public tant de considération des mœurs et inclinations particulières – argues Montaigne. Et me semble le rebours de ce qu’il lui semble à lui, que, ayant spécialement à suivre les vies des empereurs de son temps, si diverses et extrêmes en toute sorte de formes, tant de notables actions que nommément leur cruauté produisit en leurs sujets, il avait une matière plus forte et attirante à discourir et à narrer que s’il eût eu à dire des batailles et agitations universelles” [14].

Tacitus’s work lives on, overcoming and gradually integrating the ages of humankind. “Dépasser n’est pas oublier, n’est pas détruire. C’est intégrer” [15]. From a very complex viewpoint, the mechanism presupposes at the same time the revealing of the social and mentality mutations within this protean space, precisely to highlight the causes of its dramatic evolution. The artistic imaginary, the metaphorical creation of worlds is performed through language but beyond its functional limitation. “Ce n’est pas un livre à lire, c’est un livre à étudier et apprendre; il est si plein de sentences qu’il y en a à tort et à droit: c’est une pépinière de discours éthiques et politiques” [14], observed Montaigne. The unitary characteristic of the Roman thinker’s work can only be grasped by multiple readings, without the prejudices of inexpugnable barriers among literary genres. Inscribing in his writing the benchmark of eternal classicism, Tacitus’ work easily steps out of simplistic cataloguing and labeling, firmly speaking of the deepest human anxieties and providing us with ways to solve them. The historian’s role is eventually that of facilitating our self-transcendence. This is also Tacitus’s unmistakable trademark.

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