

RUMOUR AS A LITERARY DEVICE IN TACITUS

Introduction

Rumours¹ are an essential tool in Tacitus' works; this has been generally accepted and their extremely high frequency speaks for itself; nevertheless, those *rumores* have been examined with great ambiguity. Systematic approaches are not frequent,² so that the many papers studying tacitean rumours provide a disintegrated picture. Moreover, researchers typically follow a purely content-based approach, which neglects syntactic and lexical variety of rumour and, sometimes,³ drives them to misleading historical statements on the so-called *reality* of each rumour: did such or such *fama* really exist or did it come from Tacitus' inventiveness? First, this kind of discussion, usually based on the methods of source criticism, is very hard to settle, given the lack of evidence that we have on this particular question.⁴ Then, the very high number of rumours in Tacitus' works makes it hard to believe that contemporary readers actually wondered about their reality.

But the most valuable argument why the tacitean rumour cannot be merely studied through a historical approach is that we cannot extract rumours from the tacitean narrative, i.e., from a strictly structured whole in which they are placed and which they contribute to organise: hence the historical approach consisting in taking them from Tacitus' text and observing their factuality seems irrelevant. This is what I will first focus on demonstrating; then, more broadly, I will define another positive process to combine literary analysis and historical conclusions, examining what tacitean rumours mean—and especially their form, that is, how Tacitus converts rumours from oral communication into literary content.

Before that, I should specify which kind of examples I will be using in this paper: indeed, scholars studying the tacitean rumours often avoid defining them, and therefore use our modern conception of rumour in their investigation. Yet, it seems that rumour in Rome, and especially during the Principate, was far more than mere gossip or uncertain and intrusive talks: it was rather a true medium of information and communication for the lower classes of the

¹ I would like to thank Ellen O'Gorman for her availability in the organisation of this panel, and particularly for her wise counsel in the re-reading of this paper.

² The only monograph is W. Ries' dissertation (1969), and it claims not to be systematic (14).

³ See for instance Shatzman (1974) 550 and 578; Ferrero 50; Newbold (1976) 90–1 and n. 12.

⁴ An observation made, for instance, by Cogitore (2012) 411. See also Syme (1958) 315–6.

society.⁵ To stay away from the ‘trap of anachronism’,⁶ I will count as rumour every anonymous, collective, public and unofficial discourse: in my opinion, those four characteristics have to be combined to fully define what a rumour was during the Empire.

I. Rumour and Transition: A Structural Technique

The main problem of the historical approach of rumours which consists in studying whether or not they have been invented by Tacitus is that it does not take account of the nature of the context they are part of. Rumours are included in the tacitean historiography, namely in a literary work, and they are partly used by Tacitus because their natural exuberance (according to him) could find expression through a particularly brilliant style in bravura pieces. In other words, the rumour is a device set up by Tacitus to meet Cicero’s requirement that *historia* should be *ornata*. But this point has already been demonstrated by many scholars.⁷

Furthermore, the rumour plays a significant role in the structuring and organisation of the historical narrative, especially in its transition points. Indeed, since Tacitus placed himself in the long tradition of annals, he was bound to certain conventions in the narrative’s organisation, the most compelling one being perhaps the strict chronological order he had to follow, which led him to put next to each other events that were not closely connected by their geographical location or their subject. Those historiographical fetters could be partly removed either by smoothing the transitions of non-related facts or by recounting events thematically, thus breaking the chronological continuity. Both options are used by Tacitus, and in both cases the rumour is a useful tool for him.

I.1 Rumour in Spatial Transitions

In order to preserve the conventions of annals, the tacitean narrator has to observe the focus alternating between mainly two spheres, the domestic political situation (in Rome) and the external political situation, especially the wars against barbarians in the empire’s outposts. This alternation seemed perhaps somewhat artificial to a contemporary reader, as it may have reminded them of the crudeness of the first annals, which Cicero criticised so severely.⁸ This

⁵ Obviously, we cannot demonstrate such a complicated point in this paper; nevertheless, see Achard (1991) 235–8 and Courrier (2014) 682–4.

⁶ ‘Le piège de l’anachronisme’, Larran (2010) 9.

⁷ See amongst others Aubrion (1985) 494–9; Cogitore (2012) 408–9.

⁸ Cic. *De Or.* 2.53–54.

might be why Tacitus often describes some piece of news arriving in the city from the province when he needs to shift the view from one place to another. This way, the transition seems all the less an external necessity of narration since it was motivated by the course of news passing through the rumour, which Tacitus often calls *fama* when referring to it as a medium, that is, a channel of information. The very mobility of the rumour, a characteristic often spotted by Tacitus, its ability to cross the largest spaces, makes it a device most able to justify in the narrative itself transition points that would seem particularly abrupt if just assumed by the narrator.

If we focus on Tacitus' text, we will notice that the curt transition expression *at Romae* (common in Tacitus) is often softened by the description of the course of the rumour. This is very clear at the end of the second book of the *Annals* (2.82–3): after Germanicus' death, Piso has been trying to take over Syria and, once he has failed, surrenders to Cn. Sentius, who orders that he be taken to Rome. Then the narrative shifts to the *Vrbs*:

non receptae condiciones <Pisonis>, nec aliud quam naves et tutum in urbem iter concessum est. **(82) at Romae, postquam Germanici valetudo percrebuit cunctaque ut ex longinquo aucta in deterius adferebantur**, dolor ira et erumpebant questus.

The terms <of Piso> were not accepted and the only concessions made were a grant of ships and a safe-conduct to the capital. **(82)** But at Rome, when the failure of Germanicus' health became current knowledge, and very circumstance was reported with the aggravations usual in news that has travelled far, all was grief and indignation. A storm of complaints burst out ...⁹

Chapter 81, as we can see, ends with the *naves* and *iter* promised to Piso; yet the individual and tangible journey is replaced in the beginning of chapter 82 by the course of rumour (in bold) and its arrival in Rome. Here, the rumour is not referred to with a noun, but with two verbs, the one passive (*adferebantur*), the other inchoative (*percrebesco*), a frequent way in Tacitus to refer to the growth and the spread of rumour. Furthermore, the tacitean narrator does not content himself with the bare transition expression *at Romae*, but softens the geographical opposition between east and west, province and Rome, with the adverbial clause *postquam ... adferebantur*, which openly refers to the distance crossed by the rumour (*ex longinquo*). The very sociological features of the *rumor*, here its ability to cover long distances and its status of true medium for the

⁹ All texts and translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

people,¹⁰ make it suitable to smooth the transition points, not only between provinces and Rome, as here,¹¹ but also whenever the narrative is divided between two places or two parties.¹²

I.2 Rumour in Temporal Transitions

To reduce the artificiality of annalistic conventions, Tacitus also often groups together events related, but scattered in time, to give them unity in the narrative, which provides continuity and allows obvious dramatisation effects. This kind of manoeuvring is quite frequent, and Tacitus does not always clearly express it. Nevertheless when he does, rumour is often used to make this new organisation more plausible; and once again, the very sociological potentialities of the rumour, here its uncertainty, make possible this particular use. Indeed, rumour as a (popular) channel of news is, in Tacitus' aristocratic opinion, an uncertain medium, compared to the *litterae* or the *nuntii*. *Rumor* is essentially *incertus* (*Hist.* 1.34), and its unreliability is partly caused by the absence of an *auctor* clearly defined, which Cicero (*Ad. Fam.* 12.10) or Quintilian (5.3) also blamed, and is partly the sign of the control exerted by the power over information given to the *vulgus*. As Cassius Dio also points out (53.19), dissimulating information to the people is peculiar to the Roman Principate, and Galba, Tiberius and Livia give the most striking examples of this suppression.¹³

This makes rumour a plausible device for some analepses set out by Tacitus to keep the thematic unity of such or such episode, since it did not seem unlikely that the people, because of this uncertain medium, would hear about events long after they really happened, and even after the *princeps* or the elite hear about them. This is why rumours often appear just before a flashback along with the use of the first person singular, through which the author openly announces an artificial layout of the historical material. It is particularly clear-

¹⁰ In contrast with the aristocratic media, mostly written and designed by terms like *nuntius* or *litterae*, as Achard has shown (1991) 66 (for the *vulgus militum*), 77–8 and especially 235–8 (as a specificity of the imperial *vulgus*): '[les rumeurs] sont un moyen d'expression ...; elles contrebalancent la force de l'écrit et du verbe des souverains'. See also Courrier (2014) 682–4.

¹¹ Similar use in *Ann.* 1.46; 3.44 (very clear); *Hist.* 4.38.

¹² This sort of spatial contrast can happen inside a province or a foreign country (see *Ann.* 1.69; 2.25; 13.54; 14.58; *Hist.* 3.45), and even inside Rome itself: for instance, the political and ideological struggle between Galba and Otho (*Histories*, book I) is encompassed in the opposition between *Palatinus* and *Castra Praetoria*, two spatial centres often linked by the course of rumour when the narrative moves from one place to another (see *Hist.* 1.29 for example).

¹³ For instance, see Livia's behaviour in *Ann.* 1.5 and 5.3.

cut in the first book of the *Histories*: if we put the events back to their chronological order¹⁴ we will notice that the civil war of 69 AD never looked like two successive duels (Galba/Otho then Otho/Vitellius), which we could believe reading Tacitus' account, but was from the beginning a war between three opponents (Galba/Otho/Vitellius), since Otho and Vitellius both rebelled against Galba at the beginning of January. It is clear that Tacitus first tells about the struggle between Galba and Otho, then about the one between Otho and Vitellius in order both to make the events more intelligible and to create a dramatic tension. The flashback on Vitellius' rebellion takes place quite artificially in chapter 51 and is expressed through the author's personal voice,¹⁵ but the true transition point, as Ries¹⁶ has shown, is the long and pathetic rumour of the preceding chapter, which lies precisely in the centre of book I:

trepidam urbem ac simul **atrocitatem recentis sceleris**, simul **veteres Othonis mores** paventem novus insuper de Vitellio nuntius exterruit, ante caedem Galbae suppressus ... tum **duos omnium mortalium** impudicitia ignavia luxuria deterrimos velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos non senatus modo et eques ... sed vulgus quoque palam maerere. Nec iam recentia saevae pacis exempla sed repetita bellorum civilium memoria captam totiens suis exercitibus urbem ... nunc **pro Othone an pro Vitellio** in templa ituros?

Rome was in a state of excitement and horror-stricken not only at the recent outrageous crime, but also at the thought of Otho's former character. Now it was terrified in addition by news with regard to Vitellius, which had been suppressed before Galba's death ... Then the thought that two men, the worst in the world for their shamelessness, indolence and profligacy, had been apparently chosen by fate to ruin the empire, caused open grief not only to the senator and knights ... but even to the common people. Their talk was no longer of the recent horrors of a bloody peace, but they recalled memories of the civil wars and spoke of the many times the city had been captured by Roman armies ... but now—should they go to the temples to pray for an Otho or a Vitellius?

The people reacts to the *nuntius* of Vitellius' revolt, which was concealed before by Galba (*ante caedem Galbae suppressus*): indeed, we do find in the narrative of

¹⁴ Courbaud (1918) 145ff.

¹⁵ *Nunc initia causasque motus Vitelliani expeditam* (*Hist.* 1.51).

¹⁶ Ries (1969) 140–2.

chapters 1 to 50 references to this rebellion and to the news about it,¹⁷ but they are in some way excluded from the main narrative as they are excluded from the people's knowledge. Through its uncertainty, this rumour makes plausible the flashback to the beginning of year 69 and hence is used for its structural potentialities. Indeed, as one can notice reading it, it contains both references to the narrative of chapters 1 to 50 (*trepidam urbem ac simul atrocitatem recentis sceleris, simul veteres Othonis mores pauentem ...*) and premonitions of the future, that is, of the struggle between Otho and Vitellius¹⁸ (... *duos omnium mortalium impudicitia ignavia luxuria deterrimos velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos ... or nunc pro Othone an pro Vitellio in templa ituros?*), thus making it the main subject of the second part of book I and of the beginning of book II.¹⁹

What is crucial here is that this use of rumour as a transition device is absolutely not a random choice: Tacitus stresses the sociological features of the *fama* which could serve his purposes in the organisation of the narrative; its vivacity in geographical transitions; its unreliability in temporal transitions. If we might use the distinction of Genette (1972), in both cases, the voice of the crowd is an intradiegetical relay of the extradiegetical voice of the narrator, sometimes also present. Being thus a structural technique both in the micro- and macrostructure of the narrative, rumour cannot be studied only through historical analysis; yet, our literary approach is not completely uncoupled with history, since those structural aspects are based upon the sociological features of the rumour. We must now try and determine a positive method to systematise how, through the tacitean rumour, history is embedded in literature and can be retrieved only through literary analysis.

II. From Syntactic Dependency to Political Dependency: Towards a Sociocritical Approach of the Tacitean Rumour

Indeed, if Tacitus aims to represent reality in his works, literature, to which ancient historiography undoubtedly belongs, does not simply reflect the social and historical universe as mere objective facts. Based on that observation, the sociocriticism is concerned with the way a text *transcribes* history into literature.

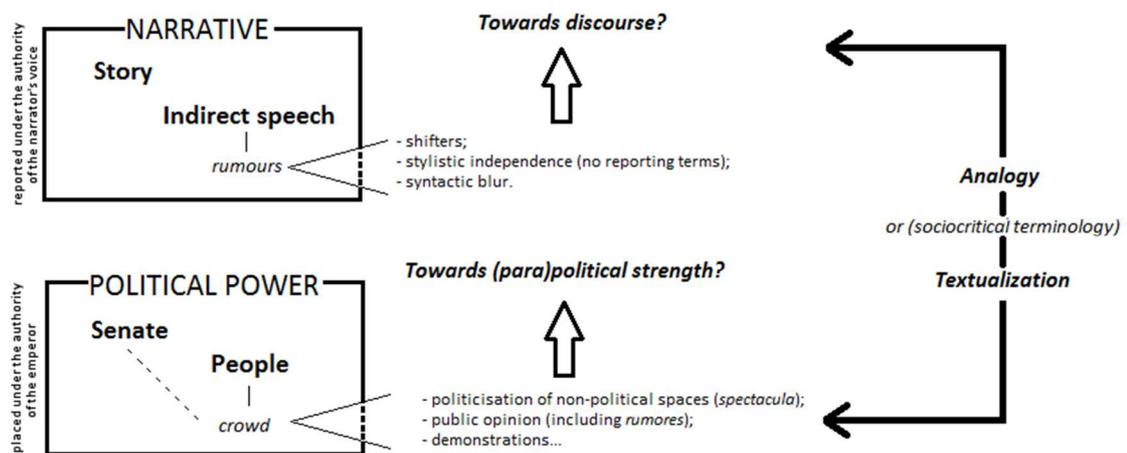
¹⁷ *Hist.* 1.12, 14, 18, 19.

¹⁸ The two contenders are mentioned at the beginning and at the end of the passage in some sort of ring composition, as Ash (2010) 122–3 points out.

¹⁹ The same kind of time manipulation made plausible thanks to the rumour can be found when Tacitus introduces the Batavian revolt (*Ann.* 4.12), which started between August and November of 69 but is reported as a whole only once it has reached some extent in the beginning of book IV (Courbaud (1918) 34–5 and n. 2; Aubrion (1985) 271 and n. 2). See also (less developed): *Ann.* 1.46; 13.6; *Hist.* 2.1, 52.

Edmond Cros (2011) defines the theoretical aspects of this approach:²⁰ ‘Sociocriticism aims to bring out the relations existing between the structures of literary ... work and the structures of the society in which this work is deeply rooted.’²¹ In other words, sociocriticism is about finding, through the most literary and linguistic facts, reflections of the historical and social world. This theoretical approach has not been much applied to ancient literature, but in our opinion the tacitean rumour can be studied in this way.

Indeed, as I have already said, in my opinion, too little attention has been given to the very form of rumour; yet, if we observe it ‘not at the level of content but at the level of forms’,²² we must be aware of a most interesting analogy: the rumour, which is, according to Tacitus, the people’s medium of information and communication, incorporates in its syntactic features the political condition of the crowd in Rome during the early Principate. More specifically, when we look into the rumour from a narratological perspective, we notice that its connection to the narrative is ambiguous as it is both subordinate to the author’s discourse (the *diegesis*) and trying, in some way, to free itself from that dependence; to us, this syntactic ambiguity transcribes within the text the similarly ambiguous relationship between the crowd and the holders of power in the Roman Empire. Let us now try and develop this analogy, which we could sum up in the following diagram:



²⁰ See also Robin (1988) (in French), who summarises the main goals of the sociocriticism (or ‘text sociology’, ‘sociologie du texte’).

²¹ Cros (2011) 32.

²² Cros (2011) 32.

II.1 Dependence to the Main Discourse

From now on, we will be focusing only on rumours whose content is reported, as they seem to make audible in the history the voice of the crowd. Now this first affirmation must immediately be moderated: unlike the discourse of individuals, which can be reported either through direct or indirect speech, the discourse of the collective is always reported through indirect speech; in other words, the voice of the *vulgus* is essentially destined to be mediated, included in the narrator's voice. This syntactical fact is, in my opinion, also ideological: being included in the narrative, the people's voice has neither authority nor autonomy. Even in the rumours whose contents take up more space in the text, like the one criticising Augustus' reign in the beginning of the *Annals*, the link of subordination is clear through the use of accusative and infinitive (which is precisely a subordinate clause), so that we can say that this *vox populi* is strictly subordinate to the author's voice, unlike the discourse of some individual reported through direct speech and thus gaining credibility and authority.

If we turn back to the tools of sociocriticism, what does this linguistic assessment *transcribe* from the historical and social world Tacitus represents? To me, this subordinate position of the rumour inside the tacitean sentence transcribes the same analogical position of subordination of the people inside the Roman Empire, the *plebs* being the main group spreading and using rumours. Indeed, the –theoretical– power of the assembly of the people, which once ensured the stability of the Roman constitution according to Polybius and Cicero, had gradually disappeared during the first century BC, and Tacitus himself describes in the beginning of the *Annals* (1.15) how the crowd lost under Tiberius one of its oldest sign of sovereignty, its elective function. From this moment on, according to Tacitus, the *vulgus* was reduced to witnessing the politics conducted by the holders of power. Losing its institutional strength, it was placed under the domination of the elite.

This is what seems obvious on the first reading. Yet, the *transcription system* of Tacitus shall not be reduced to this sole static dimension, since both the status of the rumour as indirect speech and the political position of the crowd under the Principate are far more complex and dynamic.

II.2 Paradoxical Emancipation Towards the Tacitean Narrative

Now that we have highlighted the general aspect of the incorporation of the rumours in the tacitean narrative and its ideological implications, we must get to the specifics, that is, to the very forms of those reported *rumores*. Noteworthy is how many of these rumours have an unusual and surprising form, so that we might call them *problematic indirect speeches*: indeed, even though they are essentially subordinate to the main discourse of the narrative, they seem to break

this position to attain some kind of independence thanks to some grammatical, syntactic and stylistic features, on which we will now focus.

First of all indeed, rumours, among other indirect speeches, include some terms that break the bounds of the indirect discourse. As reported speech, that is, a speech included in the narrative and absorbed by the narrator's voice, the rumour should not include deictics nor shifters, i.e., terms whose significance changes depending on the situation of utterance. Those are normally used only in direct speech. Yet, Utard has demonstrated how frequent those shifters were in Tacitus' indirect speech.²³ If we look more precisely at the rumours themselves, we observe that they include a great number of these 'syntactic anomalies':²⁴ the pronoun-adjective *hic*,²⁵ when the narrative (to whom belongs the rumour as any indirect speech) should only include *ille*; the deictic adverb *nunc*²⁶ instead of *tum* or *tunc*; the first person plural²⁷ where we would expect the third person. These grammatical breaks (although not specific to the rumour but to some indirect speeches, as Utard shows) are the first features pointing out how the rumour tends to extend across its bounds as reported speech and to claim, within the narrative itself, some kind of autonomy.

This emancipation from the narrative in which it is normally enclosed may also take stylistic and syntactic forms more specific to the rumour. Indeed, the characteristics of these problematic speeches make them very close to direct speech, first because of their extent: the very length of some of these reported rumours might suspend the narrative as the direct speech of some orator would do.²⁸ Yet, beyond its mere extent, which is already symbolic, we must be sensitive to two points. First, there is no verb or substantive introducing the reported discourse, which causes the head-on meeting between narrative and discourse, as it would be the case between the narrative and some direct speech. This deletion is obvious for instance in the reported rumour bringing to the city news of Florus' and Sacrovir's rebellion (*Ann.* 3.44):²⁹

²³ Utard (2004) 294ff.

²⁴ Utard (2004) 285.

²⁵ Or the adverbs indicating space *hic/huc/hinc/hac*. See following passages: *Ann.* 1.9–10, 68; 2.82; 3.59; 11.23; *Hist.* 3.13; 4.72, this last passage being maybe the most symbolic of this use thanks to the anaphora (Utard (2004) 295): *Hanc esse Classici, hanc Tutoris patriam; horum scelere clausas caesasque legiones.*

²⁶ See *Ann.* 1.8; *Hist.* 1.50 and 4.54.

²⁷ This *nos* can be found for instance in the rumours of *Ann.* 3.61; 4.38; 11.23.

²⁸ We might just consider the twenty-too clauses making up the rumour against Augustus in *Ann.* 1.10.

²⁹ This *fama* is also used as a structural device (cf. part I).

at Romae **non Treviros modo et Aeduos sed quattuor et sexaginta Galliarum civitates descivisse, adsumptos in societatem Germanos, dubias Hispanias**, cuncta, ut mos famae, in maius credita. optumus quisque rei publicae cura maerebat ...

At Rome, however, the tale ran that not the Treviri and Aedui only were in revolt, but the four-and-sixty tribes of Gaul: the Germans had joined the league, the Spains were wavering, and, as in all rumours, every statement was amplified and credited. The patriot, anxious for the common-wealth, grieved ...

The rumour is here highlighted in bold. As we can see, there is absolutely no transition point between the narrative (*at Romae* then *cuncta ... credita*) and the indirect speech: first, it seems to gain some independence, as if it were as independent as an direct speech; then (and in the very same motion), the rumour is being retied to the narrative through the accusative and infinitive clause, which, being grammatically a subordinate clause *without any subordinating conjunction*, expresses very well this ambiguous position. Besides, this formal ambiguity of the rumour is often rendered (especially in French) by the use of the free indirect speech when translated, that is, of a form of reported speech lying between direct and indirect speech³⁰ and most appropriate to express this problematic relation to the narrative.

The other characteristic of these problematic indirect speeches, as we call them, is that they lack narrative relay *inside* them reintroducing the indirect speech and reminding the reader of its nature as reported discourse:³¹ they have the appearance of a coherent whole, which could be extracted from the narrative and read separately, if it were not for the fact that they are syntactically *not* independent. A perfect example is the rumour against Augustus (*Ann.* 1.9–10), which is both very long and almost without any reporting term. So, the result of this absence is the *impression* of autonomy, which is paradoxical since the very grammatical form of the rumour is a syntactic sign of subordination. Noteworthy is that, according to Utard's figures, reported in the following table, these almost independent speeches are both more usual in Tacitus than in any other ancient historians and significantly more frequent for the rumours than for the indirect speeches of individuals:

³⁰ Genette (1972) 192.

³¹ They become what Utard (2004) 181 calls 'autonomous indirect speeches'.

	Tacitus		Livy	Caesar	
	rumours	all speeches	all speeches	all speeches	
Indirect speeches not introduced by a reporting verb	<i>Hist.</i> 50%	<i>Ann.</i> 26.5%	9.5%	3.1%	1%
‘Autonomous indirect speeches’	<i>Hist.</i> 73.4%	<i>Ann.</i> 46.2%	34.4%	26.6%	

In these examples, the rumour seems to emancipate itself into an autonomous and paradoxical discourse, almost similar to a direct speech. Yet, sometimes, the opposite move is also part of this emancipation process: indeed, in some ambiguous passages, it looks like the rumour is trying to merge with the narrative by breaking the subordination markers. The rumour spread by Germanicus’ soldiers risen up in rebellion (*Ann.* 1.41) contains this kind of ambiguous clauses, which I have underlined, in contrast with indubitable indirect speech, which I have put in bold:

... gemitusque ac planctus etiam militum auris oraque advertere: progrediuntur contuberniis. quis ille flebilis sonus? quod tam triste? **feminas inlustris, non centurionem ad tutelam, non militem, nihil imperatoriae uxoris aut comitatus soliti: pergere ad Treviros [et] externae fidei.**

The sobbing and wailing drew the ears and eyes of the troops themselves. They began to emerge from quarters: ‘Why’, they demanded, ‘the sound of weeping? What calamity had happened? Here were these ladies of rank, and not a centurion to guard them, not a soldier, no sign of the usual escort or that this was the general’s wife! They were bound for the Treviri—handed over to the protection of foreigners.’

In this rumour, no verb introduces the indirect speech, which is a first sign of autonomy;³² but the most interesting point is that at first reading and before the indirect discourse become indubitable with the accusative *feminas* and even more indubitable with the infinitive *pergere*, the two interrogative clauses, which only include nominative and no verb revealing the mood used, should sound either like narrative if we imply the verb *erat*, or like direct speech with the verb *est* implied; thus in both cases like a full and independent discourse. Now Tac-

³² And which has surprised both Furneaux and Goodyear (‘audacious introduction of *oratio obliqua*’, 282).

itus could have chosen for those reported questions either to express the subjunctive (like *sit* or *esset*) or to resort to the accusative and infinitive, which is of frequent use in this case; but since he did not, those two sentences are given at first glance an ambiguous position in the narration which is muddying the waters between narrative and discourse. The same kind of blurring effects can be found in the rumour against Augustus (*Ann.* 1.10, same font style):

dicebatur contra: **pietatem erga parentem et tempora rei publicae obtentui sumpta ... pacem sine dubio post haec, verum cruentam: Lollianas Varianasque clades, interfectos Romae Varrones, Egnatios, Iullos.** nec domesticis abstinebatur: abducta Neroni uxor et consulti per ludibrium pontifices **an concepto necdum edito partu rite nuberet;** Vedii Pollionis luxus; postremo Livia gravis in rem publicam mater, gravis domui Caesarum noverca. **nihil deorum honoribus relictum, cum se templis et effigie numinum per flamines et sacerdotes coli vellet.**

On the other side it was argued that ‘filial duty and the critical position of the state had been used merely as a cloak ... After that there had been undoubtedly peace, but peace with bloodshed—the disasters of Lollius and of Varus, the execution at Rome of a Varro, an Egnatius, an Iullus’. His domestic adventures were not spared: the abduction of Nero’s wife, and the farcical question to the pontiffs, whether, with a child conceived but not yet born, she could legally wed; the debaucheries of Vedius Pollio; and, lastly, Livia—as a mother, a curse to the realm; as a stepmother, a curse to the house of the Caesars. ‘He had left small room for the worship of heaven, when he claimed to be himself adored in temples and in the image of godhead by flamens and by priests!’

Here, just like in the other extract, the five nominative nouns (*uxor, pontifices, luxus, mater, noverca*) cause a breaking effect in the status of the discourse: since those clauses are part of the rumour, that is, of an indirect speech, we would expect to read just accusatives. Of course, a declarative verb in the passive voice might be implied, whose subjects would be the five substantives, as commentators have (timidly) speculated; be that as it may, the fact that Tacitus does not use accusative and infinitive clauses here does blur the position of those sentences towards the narrative and the indirect speech. In both cases, the bounds between reported speech and reporting discourse are briefly confused, and the voice of the crowd seems to attain for a moment some kind of syntactic autonomy.

So in many cases, we find in the rumours some attempt to reach a paradoxical independence towards the narrator’s voice (i.e., the narrative), in which they should normally be completely included as indirect speeches; this

emancipation is achieved thanks to the very ductility of the Latin and especially Tacitus' syntax. Now, using our sociocritical system of analogy, what do those problematic indirect speeches tell us about the *populus Romanus* during the early Principate? To me, it is the literary transcript of the popular effort to regain some political power. Indeed researchers in political history³³ have already emphasised that, although the evolution of the Roman constitution during the Principate took away from the people its institutional power, if any, and placed them under the domination of the elite, nevertheless, the people have found fields to exercise a new form of power over the political authorities, for instance by making non-political places (like the *spectacula*) new political places. *Fama* itself seems also to have sometimes turned into a political weapon.³⁴ Just like rumour's resistance to the domination of the narrative, the people, within the position of domination they endured, succeeded in finding new ways inside the system itself of regaining power with these *parapolitical* means, in a manner of speaking.

II.3 Rumour as a Sign of Disorder

Having more precisely defined this dynamic sociocritical system of analysis and specified this analogy between, on the one hand, rumours and narrative, and, on the other hand, crowd and political power, we might now wonder about its ideological insertion inside the narrative. The bare presence or absence of a *fama* does not mean anything particular for the political situation since some rumours are positive,³⁵ some negative, some spontaneous, some artificial,³⁶ but, 'at the level of the forms',³⁷ if we focus on reported rumours and the signs of syntactic instability they may contain, we might conclude that the greater their extent in the narrative, the more they overshadow the narrator's voice and the more they include those blurring effects we have defined earlier, the more they become a pure sign of disorder threatening the political stability. Put in other words: those problematic indirect speeches are symbolic of some sort of contempt of authority and order inside the tacitean sentence, which evokes the same risk inherent in the crowd, following Tacitus' opinion.³⁸

³³ See for instance Nicolet (1976) 479–94 (Republican age); Veyne (1976) 701ff; Aldrete (1999) 90–2 (gestures), 102–4, 112–4 or 147–59 (acclamations of the *urban plebs*); Courier (2014) 665–74.

³⁴ Flaig (2002) 366; Courier (2014) 688 ('[la rumeur] agissait comme un contre-pouvoir'), but *contra* 694.

³⁵ *Ann.* 2.13.

³⁶ During the battle for example: *Hist.* 2.42 and 3.25.

³⁷ Cros (2011) 32.

³⁸ Engel (1972) 28 ('[la foule] toute chargée des menaces du désordre').

It is obviously no coincidence that we read this kind of rumour spreading out inside the narrative when Tacitus describes episodes of lack of authority, where the political power is not firm and strong,³⁹ and hence does not sufficiently curb the crowd;⁴⁰ furthermore, to Tacitus, this instability is a constant threat towards imperial power, which his lexical choices illuminate, in the conspiracies narrative for instance as Cogitore has shown.⁴¹ More precisely, the prince's absence from the city,⁴² the moments of succession⁴³ or the mutinies⁴⁴ are, amongst others, circumstances favourable for those *problematic indirect speeches*. The whole extant *Histories* focus on the year 69 AD, a period of civil war where four persons in two years became successively emperors, and thus a time which potentially lacked entrenched authority. If we turn back to Utard's figures (cf. the table earlier), we must notice that there are twice as many rumours in the *Histories* than in the *Annals* that are reported without reporting verbs, thus gaining some kind of stylistic independence, maybe because the latter are about a time with firmer authority thanks to the stability of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. This illustrates well the connection between syntactic and political disorder.

Rather than citing here every extract where we would find this sociocritical system of analogy between the lack of entrenched authority (a fact which belongs to *history*), the threat of political or social disorder (an impression which is the sign of Tacitus' own class *ideology*) and some sort of syntactic blur (a process which is peculiar to *literature*), we might just compare two contrasting excerpts which particularly illustrate our subject. In both texts, because of the

³⁹ I do not agree with Aubrion's opinion (1985) 494, who claims that Tacitus uses rumours in the key moments of his narrative. Indeed, it is rather the opposite: those moments of lack of firm political power are, for this very reason, key moments of the history, and rumours are the (ideological) consequence of this absence of authority, rather than a mere rhetorical device.

⁴⁰ The expression *coercere vulgus* or *populum* appears in *Ann.* 3.60 or 6.11, for instance.

⁴¹ Amongst other passages, Cogitore (2002) 103.

⁴² See the reported rumours and the marks of syntactic instability they contain in *Ann.* 3.59 (both Tiberius and Drusus are not in Rome); *Ann.* 6.30 (24) (Tiberius is away from the city); *Hist.* 4.38 (both Vespasian and Titus, who are also consuls, are absent from Rome).

⁴³ See the many rumours in the beginning of the *Annals* (like the talks about Augustus in *Ann.* 1.9–10) and especially, more than their bare mention by the narrator, the remarkable extent of the indirect speech inside the narrative: the reported discourse take up more space than the story in five of the first ten chapters (chapters 1.4, 5, 8, 9, and 10).

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ann.* 1.26 (and, more broadly, all the reported rumours during the mutinies of *Annals*, book I); *Hist.* 4.24: this rumour is at the level of the form very 'independent' and at the level of content most daring towards Hordeonius Flaccus, whom Tacitus often describes as lacking of authority; those disrespectful words must be included in a succession of rumours (*Hist.* 1.54; 4.19, 24, 26, 27, and 34) that transcribe into the text the instability of Hordeonius' power over his soldiers. The historical consequence is to be found in *Hist.* 4.36.

circumstances, the political order is on the verge of being overthrown by the crowd; yet, the reactions of the authorities, namely the emperors Galba in the first one (*Hist.* 1.29), and Tiberius in the second (*Ann.* 4.64), favour in one case and restrict in the other the potential disorder. The presence of rumours in both extracts and, further, the way they are reported are very interesting:

ignarus interim Galba et sacris intentus fatigabat alieni iam imperii deos, cum adfertur rumor **rapi in castra incertum quem senatorem, mox Othonem esse qui raperetur**, simul ex tota urbe, ut quisque obvius fuerat, alii formidine **augentes**, quidam **minora** vero, ne tum quidem obliti adulationis.

Galba in the meantime was in ignorance. Intent upon his sacrifices, he was importuning the gods of an empire which was already another's, when a report⁴⁵ was brought to him that some senator or other was being hurried to the camp. Afterwards rumour said that it was Otho; and at the same time people came from the whole city—some, who had happened to meet the procession, exaggerating the facts through terror, some making light of them, for they did not even then forget to flatter.

nondum ea clades exoleverat cum ignis violentia urbem ultra solitum adfecit, deusto monte Caelio; **feralemque annum** ferebant et **omnibus adversis susceptum principi consilium absentiae**, qui mos vulgo, fortuita ad culpam trahentes, ni Caesar obviam isset tribuendo pecunias ex modo detrimenti. actaeque ei grates apud senatum ab inlustribus **famaque** apud populum, quia sine ambitione aut proximorum precibus ignotos et ultro accitos munificentia iuverat.

The disaster had not yet faded from memory, when a fierce outbreak of fire affected the city to an unusual degree by burning down the Caelian Hill. 'It was a fatal year, and the sovereign's decision to absent himself had been adopted under an evil star'—so men began to remark, converting, as is the habit of the crowd, the fortuitous into the culpable, when the Caesar checked the critics by a distribution of money in proportion to loss sustained. Thanks were returned to him; in the senate, by the noble; in the streets, by the voice of the people: for without respect of persons, and without the intercession of relatives, he had aided with his liberality even unknown sufferers whom he had himself encouraged to apply.

⁴⁵ Translation here is not quite exact, since the 'report' and the 'rumour' are designed by the same word in Latin (*rumor*).

In the first excerpt, Galba's lack of authority is transcribed into the text by the growing of the rumour (in bold) inside the sentence. Here, thanks to the syntax and the word order (see the hyperbaton), we start believing that the rumour is just mentioned (*adfertur rumor*); then a first complement is reported through indirect speech (*rapi in castra incertum quem senatorem*), then a second one with asyndeton specifies its content even more (*mox Othonem esse*), before a relative clause (*qui raperetur*) makes it even clearer: through this invasion of the rumour almost out of control inside the narrative, it is the growing disorder inside the city that is being illustrated.

In the second one, the indirect speech growing more and more independent (*feralemque annum ferebant et ominibus adversis susceptum principi consilium absentiae, qui mos vulgo ...*) symbolises the same threatening disorder, since the reported discourse seems to challenge the author's voice. Yet, Tiberius' action, as often in Tacitus an endowment of money, calms the people; and very symbolically, the *fama* reappears in the next sentence (*actaeque ei grates ... fama apud populum*), but this time perfectly included inside the narrative, since its content is not reported. The voice of the crowd has been here syntactically and politically silenced.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to refute the approach of the tacitean rumour as a mere historical fact whose reality could be either proven or denied; I hope that I have shown that rumours cannot be extracted from Tacitus' narrative which they are part of and participate in giving structure to. Yet, my purpose was somewhat broader: to me, historical and literary analyses have to be combined to truly understand Tacitus' representation of reality as a whole. It is the very sociological and historical features of the rumour that allow its use as a structural device, and studying this particular use, we have also made something of its phenomenology. Moreover, this combination of history and literature, of history through literature can be systematised thanks to the tools of the sociocriticism, which affirms that the structures of the society are to be found in the structures of the literary work: in my opinion, the ambiguous position of rumour as indirect speech in relation to the narrative is analogous to the paradoxical position of the crowd inside the political imperial system. In the ancient historians' works—and surely even today—history does not remain untouched and unmodified by the literature in which it is represented: it is turned into literary material and must be studied as such.

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