

REVIEW

E. O’Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 2000. Pp. vii + 200. ISBN 0-521-66056-4.

‘Tacitus is a notoriously difficult writer.’ These are the words with which O’Gorman’s book begins. So far, so good. Tacitus’ text is undeniably an extremely difficult text. And the implied ideal reader is a very smart reader. O’Gorman is certainly a very smart reader. The question, however, remains: is she the ideal reader?

The issue of reading and misreading in history was recently on the front pages in the UK and in the USA as a result of the David Irving Libel Trial. Reading is the theme of O’Gorman’s book. Or rather reading Tacitus reading characters reading events in history. Her argument is that ‘Tacitus conveys to his readers his conception of imperial politics by enmeshing them in ambiguous and complicated Latin sentences’ (p. 1); and that that conception is an ironic one in which, by representing characters in the act of interpretation and misreading, he is commenting on the contorted language and hypocrisy of the principate and its perversion of Rome’s republican structure. O’Gorman opens her case by drawing on Hayden White to define the ironic historian ‘as one who discloses “the *contrast* that lies hidden within every resemblance and unity”’ (p. 10, cf. p. 182f.) and by stressing ‘the status of falsehood in the process of historical understanding’ (p. 5) and the failure of interpretative skills as ‘a dominant feature of Tacitus’ Imperial Rome’ (p. 13). She then proceeds to illustrate it with a series of close analyses of passages from the *Annales*: the mutinies; Germanicus and the rest; Tiberius; Claudius and the alphabet; Livia and the younger Agrippina; and, finally, Nero.

O’Gorman’s approach certainly pays some dividends, and I find her starting point, that we must examine how Tacitus’ style ‘informs not only what we read but *how* we read’, extremely sympathetic. She is good on the darkly morose, multi-faceted, mysterious Tiberius, and particularly impressive and revealing on Nero’s lack of his own voice, how his words are ghost-written or quotations from others. And it is, of course, true that the deviousness of Tacitus’ style is in keeping with the political regime of which it speaks, though I did miss references here to Polybius {actually, Cassius Dio} 53.19, on the shift from republic to empire; Seneca, *Ep.* 114, on the style of Sallust; and, especially, to Syme’s discussion of the stylistic difference between the Tiberian and Neronian books. But, all too often, O’Gorman over-

does her ‘creative misreading’, as she calls it (p. 22), wherein she tries to do justice to Tacitean density by attempting ‘to allow a multiplicity of meanings to interact at the level of the individual sentence, within the passage as a whole, and across the entire text’ (p. 21), and descends into an inspissated and self-defeatingly vertiginous *mise-en-abyme* of pretension.

Take this, for example, on the Pannonian mutiny (p. 31):

when the relocation of the standards is characterised as other than the merger of the legions, at the same time as the similarity of the two acts is highlighted, the narrator points up the relationship of metaphor which could be seen to operate here. Metaphor as the representation of one thing by another perhaps suggests that the standards are to be translated into another event (*in alio vertunt*). If we remember that *vertere* can mean ‘to translate’ as well as ‘to divert’, we could read the standards as a metaphor operating at the level both of action and of narrative. But how can the standards be a metaphor for something that doesn’t take place? This is why it could be said that what they do is ‘stand in for’ (as a diversion) rather than ‘stand for’ (as a metaphor).

Or this on Germanicus and the oracle of Clarian Apollo at Colophon (p. 66):

The enigma (*ambages*) which is solved in the resolution of Germanicus’ life is enacted by his wanderings, through which (*per ambages*) he reaches his premature death. If we return to the most ambiguous moment in those wanderings, the *imago* at Actium, we could conclude that the moment of recognition at this site is deferred to the point of Germanicus’ death, when he becomes replaced by an *imago*, that the moment of recognition at Actium is not afforded to Germanicus but to another onlooker, in an anticipation of retrospection back from the moment in the future when Germanicus’ life has become part of history.

Tacitus’ writing is knotty, but it is surely not *that* knotty. Who or what, one might ask, are such clever readings for? O’Gorman’s answer would seem to be that the work of reading Tacitus’ anxiously strained, tautly contradictory, and subversive text itself implicates the reader in a form of political protest. Perhaps. It is possible that the historian’s attractively barbed scepticism may sow the seeds of a parallel and productive scepticism in some readers. O’Gorman’s fast hands and fancy footwork are not necessary for that, however. It is always instructive to observe a subtle reader grappling with a slippery text over several rounds, as Roland Barthes did in *S/Z*, and that was the aspect of O’Gorman’s study that I most enjoyed. Yet ultimately it comes

down to this: reading Tacitus reading characters misreading is one thing; reading O’Gorman creatively misreading Tacitus reading characters misreading may prompt many simply to throw in the towel.

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