NERONIAN PAST IN THE *HISTORIES* OF TACITUS[1]

Abstract: The mentions of Nero in the *Histories* have several functions. Historically, they allow the interpretation of the facts, especially to evaluate the realism and efficiency of the policy of the various emperors. Ideologically they highlight some basic features of the Principate as a regime, especially the role of the dynasty and the imperial court or the personal nature of the relationship between the prince and soldiers. Historiographically they give the image of a Tacitus who adopts the perspective of a senator and, as such, reveals, about a sensitive issue such as *libertas*, some ambiguity which suggests that, even under Trajan, the upper classes should not abandon their *prudentia*.

Keywords: Tacitus, Nero, Roman Historiography, Principate, Year of the Four Emperors, Plupast

In a recent book J. Grethlein and C. B. Krebs have considered two main functions of the plupast in ancient historiography: it influences the interpretation of the facts and favours, by a kind of 'mise en abyme', a reflexion on the writing of history.[2] Concerning Tacitus, these two functions have been highlighted by T. Joseph in the same book.[3] In this paper about the references to Nero in the *Histories*, I would add a third function: from an ideological point of view, the plupast allows Tacitus to highlight some characteristics of the regime, which could be regarded as the political legacy of the Julio-Claudians; then, the point would not be what is said of Nero himself, but the image of the Principate conveyed by the mentions of this emperor.[4]

We will try to see how these three aspects appear in the 51 passages of the *Histories* where Nero is explicitly mentioned (*pace* the index of the CUF edition of this work).[5]

[1] I warmly thank Ellen O'Gorman who agreed to review the English text of this paper. She is of course not responsible for its content.

[2] Grethlein and Krebs (2012), esp. 'Introduction', 8–11.

[3] Joseph (2012).

[4] Devillers (2009) has discussed in this perspective the mentions of Augustus at the beginning of the *Annals*.

[5] 1.4.2–3; 5.2; 6.1–2; 7.3; 8.2; 9.3; 10.3; 13.2–4; 16.2–3; 20.1–2; 21.1; 22.1–2; 25.2; 30.2; 46.1; 48.1; 49.1; 51.5; 53.2; 65.1; 70.1; 72.1; 73.1; 76.3; 77.2–3; 78.2; 89.2–3; 2.5.2; 8.1; 9.1; 10.1; 11.1; 27.2; 54.1–2; 58.1; 66.1; 71.1–2; 76.2–3; 86.1–2; 95.1; 3.6.1; 62.2–3; 68.1; 4.7.3; 8.3; 13.1; 41.2; 42.3–6; 43.1; 44.2; 5.10.1.

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1. Galba

After a brief summary of the content of his *Histories*, Tacitus gives a picture of the situation at Rome and in the Empire in 69. He exposes several reactions at the death of Nero. As happened after the death of Augustus (*Ann.* 1.9–10: *Totengericht*),[6] some are favourable, some are unfavourable:

> 1.4.2–3. finis Neronis, ut laetus primo gaudentium impetu fuerat, ita uarios motus animorum non modo in urbe apud patres aut populum aut urbanum militem, sed omnes legiones ducesque conciuerat, euolgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri. sed patres laeti, usurpata statim libertate licentius ut erga principem nouum et absentem; primores equitum proximi gaudio patrum; pars populi integra et magnis domibus adnexa, clientes libertique damnatorum et exulum in spem erecti; plebs sordida et circo ac theatris sueta, simul deterrimi seruorum aut qui, adesis bonis, per dedecus Neronis alebantur, maesti et rumorum auidi.

Here the diversity of the opinions is not only a matter of personal point of view, but depends on the quality of the people. The respectable portion of the Romans—senators and equestrians—was happy with Nero's death; the worthless *plebs* were unhappy. By devoting more space to those who rejoiced, Tacitus expresses the bias of a historian-senator, who attaches more weight to the opinion of his class. At the same time, he establishes a historical fact: Nero has divided society or deepened fractures that existed in it. This observation itself[7] reflects the belief in the key role of the personality of the prince during the Principate. Tacitus repeatedly emphasises this major feature of the political regime, particularly in the first book of the *Histories*.[8] Thus emerge immediately three trends: historically, the interpretation of facts (Nero as a source of division); historiographically, the self-representation of the historian (the adoption of a senatorial perspective); ideologically, the perception of the regime (the concentration of power).

Regarding the first point (interpretation of facts), the plupast can also be used to illuminate the policy of the various emperors. So about Galba:

> 1.5.2. laudata olim et militari fama celebrata seueritas eius angebat aspernantes ueterem disciplinam atque ita quattuordecim annis a

[6] Syme (1958) 213 hypothesises that Vespasian's funeral could also have inspired such contradictory discourses.

[7] The same distinction between good and bad citizens will be made by assessing a Neronian (plu)past in the words Tacitus attributes to Galba about the adoption of Piso: *Nero a pessimo quoque semper desiderabitur; mihi ac tibi prouidendum ne etiam a bonis desideretur* (1.16.4).

[8] Cf. Devillers (2012a).

> Nerone adsuefactos ut haud minus uitia principum amarent quam olim uirtutes uerebantur. accessit Galba uox pro re publica honesta, ipsi anceps, legi a se militem, non emi; nec enim ad hanc formam cetera erant.

At first glance, the new emperor and the army[9] seem to have two different pasts: for Galba, the reference is 'the old times' (cf. *olim*), for the pretorians, it is Nero's times. But, at a second glance, things are more complex: though he says that he would select, and not buy, his soldiers (cf. Plut. *Galb.* 18.4–5),[10] Galba does not fundamentally challenge the link between the prince and soldiers and, finally, only one past matters: the Principate as it was established by Augustus,[11] whoever exercises power. So Galba, in his ambitions to offer an image of republicanism, lacks credibility and fails to hold a consistent pattern of conduct (*nec enim ad hanc formam cetera erant*). His mistake is to attempt to distinguish himself from Nero in an area which was within the nature of the regime and to which, basically, the public image projected by Nero was better suited than the one Galba was attempting to project (cf. also Plut. *Galb.* 3.4; 29.4).

This idea recurs a few lines later:

> 1.7.2–3. … inuiso semel principi seu bene seu male facta parem inuidiam adferebant. venalia cuncta, praepotentes liberti, seruorum manus subitis auidae et tamquam apud senem festinantes, eademque nouae aulae mala, aeque grauia, non aeque excusata. ipsa aetas Galbae inrisui ac fastidio erat adsuetis iuuentae Neronis et imperatores forma ac decore corporis, ut est mos uolgi, comparantibus.

Two other features in this passage stand out. As for the historian's self-representation, senatorial prejudice is discreetly manifested in the parenthesis, *ut est mos uulgi*, indicating that the author distances himself from the *uulgus*. As for the evocation of the Principate as a regime, the influence of the imperial entourage is underlined through the *potentia* of the freedmen and the greed of the slaves; the personalisation of power is emphasised through the effect created by the physical appearance of the prince.

Finally, one last anecdote illustrates the inability of Galba to adopt the right attitude to the Neronian past: after his death, his head severed from his body was found near the grave of a freedman of Nero he had punished

[9] In this regard, the role played by the army in the events following the death of Nero is another significant element recurrent in the early chapters of the book 1 (1.6.1–2; 8.2; 9.3).

[10] On this passage, also Sella (2015) 11.

[11] The coinage of Galba indicates also this choice to enhance the memory of Augustus; Sella (2015) 8–10.

(1.49.1). This symbolises how much his rejection of the Neronian past was not understood: he wanted to break with Nero (punishing his freedman), and this led to his own (even physical) 'break'.

2. Otho

When he chooses a successor, Galba discards Otho because he looks too much like Nero (1.13.2: *rei publicae … frustra a Nerone translatae, si apud Neronem relinqueretur*). Otho, insofar as a private matter—proving his closeness to the prince—caused Otho's disgrace (1.13.3; also 21.1),[12] differs effectively from Piso, finally adopted by Galba, who was exiled for political reasons (1.48.1) and was in a situation of rupture with Nero.[13] But Otho's Neronian profile, supported by a common past (and a common wife) with Nero (1.13.3–4), precisely favoured him, at least with the court and the army, the two bodies which under the Principate were the king-makers. In that context, for example, he makes Flavius Sabinus prefect of the city, influenced by the choice of Nero, under whom Sabinus had held the same post. For what could be called one of 'the basics' of the Principate (the link with the soldiers), Otho, as embodying a Neronian figure, seems more capable than Galba to make a decision that will satisfy the army.

Similarly some of those joining Otho were regretting having lost the licence that existed under Nero (1.25.2: *memoria Neronis ac desiderium prioris licentiae*); two freedmen of Nero, Coenus (2.54.1) and the powerful Crescens (1.76.3), are mentioned as supporters of Otho; the fourteenth legion redirects towards Otho its former devotion to Nero (2.11.1; also 2.27.2; 54.1; 66.1); Albinus, whom Nero had appointed to the government of the Mauritania Caesariensis was among the followers of Otho (2.58.1).[14]

Therefore, to some extent, Otho aspired to reproduce the Neronian Principate:

> 1.22.1. et intimi libertorum seruorumque, corruptius quam in priuata domo habiti, aulam Neronis et luxus, adulteria, matrimonia cete-

[12] Duchêne (2014) 70, shows how Tacitus, in relating this affair, emphasises the personal connection with Nero. Cf. also Devillers (2008).

[13] Cf. also Sella (2015) 9: 'De plus, cette adoption montre un refus de l'hérédité par lequel il se distingue clairement de la pratique julio-claudienne'.

[14] On some of these examples, Sella (2015) 14 (n. 67: 'On peut voir un paradoxe dans le fait qu'Othon ait usé de son statut d'exilé officieux pour soutenir Galba et contribué à renverser Néron, avant de prétendre le ressusciter lorsque Galba fut devenu impopulaire').

> rasque regnorum libidines auido talium, si auderet, ut sua ostentantes, quiescenti, ut aliena exprobrabant.[15]

However the peculiar conception of the Principate by Nero, which has been called 'Neronism',[16] was probably a cause of the failure of this prince. By imitating too overtly such a model Otho inherited its weakness and was himself in danger of being overthrown.[17] Furthermore he was not militarily in the same situation as Nero: while the latter was defeated by rumours, Otho faces a powerful army (cf. 1.89.2); under these circumstances, he had to avoid committing the same mistakes as Nero.[18]

For all these reasons, despite his possible desire to follow Nero's example, he had, even temporarily, to hint at some distance.[19] This explains some of his efforts to overcome the Neronian heritage. However, as it is shown by the chapters 72–73, intended as a pair,[20] it was difficult, especially when it came to a specific component of the imperial system, in this case the court. On the one hand, Tigellinus, symbol of the excesses of Nero, was forced to commit suicide (1.72);[21] on the other hand, Calvia Crispinilla, *magistra libidinum Neronis*, far from being condemned, was prosperous under the successive reigns (1.73).[22] Other attempts to distinguish himself from Nero are not fully convincing: a) he returned to the senatorial order men who had been exiled under Claudius or Nero (1.77.3), but these men were convicted for extortion, and not for treason; their greed, not any resistance to princes, was then forgiven; Tacitus regrets it (*etiam bonae leges peribant*); b) he gave to citizens recalled from exile the remaining treasures of Nero, but the measure was actually ineffective (1.90.1: *iustissimum donum et in speciem magnificum, sed … usu sterile*).[23]

[15] Cf. also 1.30.1, in the speech of Piso: *stupra nunc et commissationes et feminarum coetus uoluit animo; haec principatus praemia putat, quorum libido ac uoluptas penes ipsum sit, rubor ac dedecus penes omnes.*

[16] On this conception of the Principate, e.g. Cizek (1982).

[17] Also Sella (2015) 14.

[18] Thus, for example, he refused to delay his departure from Rome; 1.89.3; cf. Sella (2015) 17.

[19] Par ex. Duchêne (2014) 71–2 (p. 72: 'Une fois parvenu au pouvoir, l'attitude d'Othon vis-à-vis de la mémoire de Néron est particulièrement ambiguë'; also p. 77); Sella (2015) 13–9 (p. 13: 'Il est également délicat pour lui [= Otho] de recourir à la mémoire de Néron').

[20] Morgan (2000) 487; Devillers (2012b), including Celsus in this framework.

[21] On this episode, Devillers (2012b).

[22] On Calvia Crispinilla, Morgan (2000).

[23] He was not in this economic area more efficient than Galba, under whom the recovery of sums lavished by Nero had provoked unrest (1.20.2).

The result is some ambiguity which is obvious in the lines that most directly address the attitude of Otho towards Nero:

> 1.78.2. inter quae necessitate praesentium rerum et instantibus curis excusata, ne tum quidem immemor amorum statuas Poppaeae per senatus consultum reposuit; creditus est etiam de celebranda Neronis memoria agitauisse spe uolgum adliciendi. et fuere qui imagines Neronis proponerent; atque etiam Othoni quibusdam diebus populus et miles, tamquam nobilitatem ac decus adstruerent, Neroni Othoni acclamauit. ipse in suspenso tenuit, uetandi metu uel adgnoscendi pudore.

First, we are reminded, through Poppaea, of the personal nature of the relationship with Nero. Then, it is suggested that the link to this emperor was mostly considered as part of a conception of power which favoured the *uulgus* (*spe uolgum adliciendi*; also *populus et miles*)[24] at the expense of higher classes. Thirdly this link is fundamentally personal, as indicated by the form it took: a way to greet Otho associating his name and that of Nero. As for the reaction of Otho, he did not dare to break that link on which his power depended (*uetandi metu*) and even (as it has been suggested at 1.25.2), he would secretly aspire to reproduce it (*adgnoscendi pudore*).[25]

Although there is no place here to discuss the the false Neros,[26] the narrative concerning the first of them (2.8–9) reveals the same duality in the perception of the last Julio-Claudian. On the one hand, this case suggests that the monarchic figure of Nero and his 'artistic' way of ruling (the usurper was skilled at playing cithara and singing, 2.8.1) was still appealing; on the other hand, the narrative develops largely the idea of fear caused by this coup (cf. 2.8.3: *inde late terror*), implying a rejection of disorders that would be provoked by a return of Nero.

3. Vitellius

The first mention of Nero in the tacitean narrative of the reign of Vitellius appears in the summary of the events that lead to the uprising of Vitellius:

> 1.51.5. undique atroces nuntii, sinistra ex urbe fama; infensa Lugdunensis colonia et pertinaci pro Nerone fide fecunda rumoribus; sed

[24] Also, in a similar context, Suet. *Otho* 7.2: *ab infima plebe appellatus Nero*.

[25] Cf. Duchêne (2014) 71.

[26] Pappano (1937); Tuplin (1989); Kozlowski (2011); also Gallivan (1973).

> plurima ad fingendum credendumque materies in ipsis castris, odio, metu et, ubi uires suas respexerant, securitate.

Galba bears some responsibility for the situation: confiscating the income of Lyon—the colony was close to Nero—for the benefit of Vienne, he has exacerbated the anger of the former towards the latter; the result is a dispute in which the army of Vitellius intervenes (1.65). In this case, for Vitellius,[27] some kind of continuity with Nero comes in the form of an antagonism towards Galba.[28] Moreover here the evocation of Nero is associated with rumours. This association, that we find here throughout a province, had already been reported for the *Vrbs* at 1.4.3 (supra). Then it characterised the worst part of the *plebs*. The recurrence might suggest a parallel between the *plebs* who were longing for Nero and those who were supporting Vitellius. Furthermore the connotation of the rumours is both political and historiographical.[29] Politically they originate from disorders that disrupt the empire. Historiographically they are part of the difficulties the historian encounters when establishing the facts. This historiographical concern is particularly noticeable at the end of the passage through the use of terms that belong to the lexicon of the historian: *ad fingendum credendumque materies*. Turning then to the army Tacitus specifies some factors that lead to an alteration of the truth, namely hatred and fear (he adds the sentiment of security), a pair that may be seen as echoing his prefaces, especially that of *Histories* (1.1.3: *sed incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est*).

The climate that promotes Vitellius, and is promoted by him, appears therefore inherently Neronian and adverse to historical inquiry (so anti-Tacitean). Again the evocation of Nero operates on three levels: historically it suggests that Vitellius was in the tradition of Nero; historiographically it suggests the difficulties faced by the senator Tacitus in writing the history of these events; ideologically it emphasises rumour as a feature of the imperial regime. Then Vitellius quickly appears as a Neronian avatar:

> 2.71.1. quantoque magis propinquabat, tanto corruptius iter immixtis histrionibus et spadonum gregibus et cetero Neronianae aulae ingenio: namque et Neronem ipsum Vitellius admiratione celebrabat, sectari

[27] Cf. also 1.53.2, for the former support given by the army of Upper Germany to Nero. Similarly, Nero is favoured in his venture by the movements of the army, many of which have been initiated by Nero (cf. 1.70.1).

[28] It is the same at 4.13.1: Civilis accused under Nero and acquitted by Galba is again in danger under Vitellius. However, on the use of some Galban themes by Vitellius, Sella (2015) 21–2.

[29] On the functions of Tacitean rumors, esp. Gibson (1998).

> cantantem solitus, non necessitate, qua honestissimus quisque, sed luxu et saginae mancipatus emptusque.

While Otho was only suspected of aspiring to practise the same excesses as Nero, Vitellius openly adopts the way of life of this prince (also D.C. 65.4.1; 7.3).[30] The passage also comprises a social censure: spontaneously adhering to Nero, Vitellius had acted differently to many other nobles who had been forced to such flattery. This Neronian dimension is also visible in some of his supporters who had distinguished themselves in a bad way under Nero: Valens had played in mimes (3.62.2), Arrius Varus had denigrated Corbulo (3.6.1).[31]

The anniversary of Vitellius is another occasion to remember Nero (cf. also Suet. *Nero* 50.2):

> 2.95.1. quin et natalem Vitellii diem Caecina ac Valens editis tota urbe uicatim gladiatoribus celebrauere ingenti paratu et ante illum diem insolito. laetum foedissimo cuique, apud bonos inuidiae fuit quod exstructis in Campo Martio aris inferias Neroni fecisset.

Once again, the return of the Neronian era, with its splendour and its games, is discriminating: it delighted the worst citizens, but the good ones took offence (also D.C. 65.7.3). Such a function of the Neronian past has been mentioned too for the reign of Galba (1.4.2–3; 16.4).

4. Vespasian

Vespasian flourished under Nero. Tacitus recalls that Nero had chosen him to conduct the war in Judea (1.10.3; 5.10.1) or that he had appointed his brother as prefect of the City (1.46.3). In that sense continuity exists with Nero. However Tacitus does not emphasise it and in relation to Vespasian or his entourage Nero appears sometimes as a mere chronological marker (2.5.2: in the summary of the relationship between Vespasian and Mucian; 2.86.1: in the career of Antonius Primus). Compared to Otho and Vitellius,

[30] This similarity between Vitellius and Nero is also strongly emphasised by Suetonius: Duchêne (2014) 75–7 (cf. Suet. *Vit.* 11.3). Cf. Sella (2015) 23–4: 'Même s'il faut tenir compte des exagérations dues à une tradition hostile, les actes destinés à remettre à l'honneur la mémoire de Néron ne sont pas contestables … Vitellius montre qu'il n'entend pas, à la différence de Galba, refonder la figure du *princeps* en revenant aux origines, mais qu'il compte simplement poursuivre dans la voie suivie par Claude et Néron à laquelle sa famille avait tant contribué'.

[31] With a different issue, but for a similar motive, Pedanius Costa was displeasing to Vitellius precisely for having risen against Nero (2.71.2).

Vespasian seems essentially passive in his relationship with Nero: he is appointed by him to various posts, but he manifests apparently no willingness to belong to his inner circle (like Otho) or to emulate his private behaviour (like Vitellius); after he became emperor, he certainly distanced himself from Nero (like Galba), but this process was not accompanied by any ostentatious desire, obsolete and finally inefficient, to promote older political values.[32]

The attitude towards informers mirrors the differences between the four emperors.

a) After Galba rose to power, it was decided to take to court those who had been accusers under the precedent emperors, especially Nero. Tacitus alludes to this measure which indicates a break with the preceding reign. But at 2.10.1, he writes that it had been unequally applied and at 4.6.2, we have an indication of this non-application, since we learn that Helvidius abandoned the prosecution of Eprius Marcellus in revenge for his father-in-law Thrasea.

One cause of this failure could be the design in which this measure was claimed: at 4.42, in a speech of Curtius Montanus, violently attacking the accusers, the historian gives more details about that:

> 4.42.6: elanguimus, patres conscripti, nec iam ille senatus sumus, qui occiso Nerone delatores et ministros more maiorum puniendos flagitabat.

The mention of the *mos maiorum* reflects an intent to associate these trials with the restoration of old values. As well as other positions displayed by Galba, this was not appropriated to the times; it could not be achieved.

b) Otho tried to distance himself from Nero, but was often unconvincing. It is the same for the trials of informers: Tacitus evokes a former accuser, Faustus, who was sentenced under Otho (2.10), but the man who summoned Faustus before the Senate had held himself the same profession with profit: *nec poena criminis, sed ultor displicebat* (2.10.3).

c) Under Vitellius we read nothing about any trial of informers. This is mainly because Tacitus does not want to deliver information that marks some rupture between this emperor and Nero. On the contrary, he notes that Sariolenus, who was accuser under Nero, continued this activity under Vitellius (4.41.2).

[32] Cf. Sella (2015) 27: 'L'exaltation de la mémoire de Galba devait donc être manipulée avec précaution: le vieil empereur avait perdu le consensus et, même si certains sénateurs le regrettaient, Vespasien risquait de perdre le soutien des soldats othoniens qui l'avaient spontanément soutenu en se coulant trop radicalement dans son empreinte', avec renvoi à Gagé (1952).

d) For the reign of Vespasian, the theme is quite present in the book 4, particularly through the chapters in which Helvidius Priscus appears.[33] This man was the son-in-law, and the disciple, of Thrasea Paetus who had been forced to commit suicide by Nero.[34] By this link, Helvidius embodied a break with Nero he also claimed for Vespasian by remembering that this prince had been once the friend of Thrasea (4.7.2: *Vespasiano amicitiam cum Thrasea, Sorano, Sentio*).[35] This concern of Helvidius to associate Vespasian with a rejection of Nero is expressed in his attempt to sue Eprius Marcellus, the accuser of Thrasea (4.6.1). Although he accepted the impunity of this man under Vespasian, he did not want Eprius to be put in the spotlight (4.7.3: *accusatores etiam si puniri non oporteat, ostentari non debere*). The defence given by Tacitus to Eprius is not uninteresting:

> 4.8.2–4: se meminisse temporum quibus natus sit, quam ciuitatis formam patres auique instituerint; ulteriora mirari, praesentia sequi; bonos imperatores uoto expetere, qualescumque tolerare. non magis sua oratione Thraseam quam iudicio senatus adflictum; saeuitiam Neronis per eius modi imagines inlusisse, nec minus sibi anxiam talem amicitiam quam aliis exilium. denique constantia, fortitudine Catonibus et Brutis aequaretur Heluidius: se unum esse ex illo senatu, qui simul seruierit. suadere etiam Prisco ne supra principem scanderet, ne Vespasianum senem triumphalem, iuuenum liberorum patrem, praescriptis coerceret. quo modo pessimis sine fine dominationem, ita quamuis egregiis modum libertatis placere.

Eprius remembers that the condemnation of Thrasea was caused by the dynamic of the Principate that pushed the Senate to act according to the will of the prince (and it is the Senate that sentenced Thrasea), and that this dynamic was still at work, whereas Vespasian was a wiser ruler. Thus it is in asserting the continuity of the regime, beyond the person of the princes, that he advises not to break sharply with the Neronian times and—it can be suggested—not to make the same mistake as Galba who underestimated the weight of permanence factors in handling the political context. According to his logic, the disgrace of informers, which was advocated by Helvidius—whose models (Cato, Brutus) are as Republican and old-fashioned as those of Gal-

[33] On Helvidius, cf. Galimberti (2000).

[34] Thrasea is proeminent in the *Annals* as a figure of senatorial resistance to Nero: e.g. Heldmann (1991); Devillers (2002); Turpin (2008); Strunk (2010b).

[35] A link with the so-called philosophical opposition to Nero could be effectively seen in the marriage of a son of Vespasian with a daughter of Corbulo ; D.C. 66.3.4; Sella 2015, 26. Generally on the eclectism of the propaganda of Vespasian and of his attitude towards the precedent princes, Sella (2015) 24–31 (and 38–40, specifically on his coinage).

ba—fails to recognise that delation is an ill inherent in the Principate. Under a bad prince the delation will flourish again and senators who indulge in this activity suffer to some degree in order to survive under a bad prince; whatever people choose—to collaborate or to resist—they have to endure the perils and the anxieties. Even under a better emperor, the Principate accepts only freedom if it is moderated (*quamuis egregiis modum libertatis placere*). The view of Eprius prevails in this case.

The argument of the continuity of the regime, however, is reversible. It is in its name that some time later, Curtius Montanus advocates to condemn Aquilius Regulus, another informer of the Neronian period: since the Principate will inevitably produce other tyrants, the impunity of a Regulus should not encourage younger men to imitate him (4.42.5). But when Helvidius, after the speech of Montanus, thought he could pick on Eprius, he met resistance again and created dissension within the Senate (4.43). At the next meeting, Domitian advised the Senate to forget the (Neronian) past and Mucianus spoke in favour of the accusers (4.44.1). Senators therefore gave up prosecutions against them. Mucianus however made one concession and two men who had been sentenced under Nero and were back at Rome were sent into exile again (4.44.2). These two men were unimportant and discontent persisted: the power of the accusers had not been broken and they were still feared (4.44.3).

In sum, Vespasian adopts on this issue an attitude marked by some ambiguity: some accusers were indicted (4.41–2), but others remained unpunished. This ambiguity, however, differs from Otho. Otho had modelled himself on Nero, but political considerations led him to distance himself from this emperor; however, as a former friend of Nero, he had no legitimacy to do this, which put him in awkward position, cast doubt on his credibility and doomed his initiatives to ineffectiveness. On the contrary, Vespasian, once on familiar terms with Thrasea Paetus and only in debt to Nero insofar as he deserved, was in a position to gain credibility by rejecting him, but political considerations (including the failure of Galba, who had opted for a radical opposition to Nero) led him to exercise restraint.

Synthesis

Firstly, the examination of the attitudes towards the Neronian past could be a historical and political tool of analysis for Tacitus. The historian can thus highlight certain cleavages in society, scrutinise certain positions adopted by princes and explain their success or failure.[36] While in his handling of the Ne-

[36] From a historical point of view, Sella (2015) 6 observes that the problem faced by the opponents to Nero in 68 was 'de 'faire le tri' dans la pratique impériale entre ce qui devait être rejeté avec Néron et que l'on pouvait conserver'.

ronian past (plupast for Tacitus), Galba is too unrealistically Republican, Otho does not take it on openly and Vitellius is overly attached to this model,[37] only Vespasian cleverly embodies a kind of middle path determined by pragmatism and a form of oblivion.

Furthermore, ideologically, Nero is a tyrant, just like Tiberius or Caligula (4.42.5: *an Neronem extremum dominorum putatis? Idem crediderant qui Tiberio, qui Caio superstites fuerunt*), but also as holder of the power established by Augustus. Thus he appears in three enumerations of emperors: two begin with Augustus, of which one evokes the introduction of the regime (1.89.3: *ex quo diuus Augustus res Caesarum composuit*), the other the settling of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (2.76.2, in a speech of Mucianus: *fundatam longo imperio domum*); the third begin with Caesar (3.68.1). In this regard, for example, many references to Nero during the reign of Otho stress some imperial practices and their impact upon society: liberality of the prince (1.20.1–2; 90.1); imperial court through the reverses of fortune of Otho (1.21.1; 22.1; 78.2) or through the characters of Tigellinus and Calvia Crispinilla (1.72–3); link between the prince and the soldiers (1.30.2), between the prince and the people (1.78.3); the fact that prodigies are considered as concerning the person of the emperor (1.89.3) …

Finally, in terms of self-representation, we have to consider the possible analogy between how Nero was seen in 69 and how Tacitus conceived his own investigation into the past. Especially the chapters which refer to Helvidius Priscus raise the issue of senatorial *libertas* (4.5.2: *nihil aeque ac libertatem hausit*; 8.4: *modum libertatem*; 44.1: *libertatem coeptatam*), a theme which is never very far from the concerns of the historian-senator writing under the first Antonines.[38] These chapters on Helvidius suggest that there are limits to freedom. Such an observation, which in the historical narrative is relative to the reign of Vespasian, is consistent with the picture which is given of this emperor in the *Dialogus of the Orators*.[39] If we relate it to the time when Tacitus composed the *Histories*, we could see in this opinion a somewhat stereotyped praise of Trajan, under whom freedom would have no limits.[40] However the

[37] In these last two cases, the interpretation that Tacitus made would not completely match what was the attitude of Otho and Vitellius to Nero; cf. Carré (1999) (also Sella [2015] 22–3, on some Julio-Claudian and Galban theme in the coinage of Vitellius), followed by Duchêne (2014); according to the latter, the similarity between Nero and Otho/Vitellius established by the literary sources are explained by the stereotype of the bad prince.

[38] On *libertas* in the Tacitean works, Ducos (1977); Morford (1991); Cogitore (2011) 162–6.

[39] Devillers (2015).

[40] E.g. Kemezis(2014) 5: '… virtually the whole Tacitean corpus can be read as a comment on the narrative put forth by the *optimus princeps*'.

stereotypical character of the process (widely used by Pliny in his *Panegyricus*)[41] prohibits any certain conclusion that this expresses a true feeling of Tacitus. Moreover, the idea of a limit to liberty under Vespasian appears most openly in a speech of Eprius (4.8.4: *modum libertatis*), an accuser who is not the most probable spokesman for the historian. As it often happens, Tacitus clouds the issue. This entanglement of the subtext[42]—which has echoes in the historical narrative through the reversibility of some arguments or the insistence on the diverse reactions of the senators—seems itself significant. Do we not see this perpetual escape[43] as a way of emphasising that even under Trajan it remained impossible to speak unambiguously about some controversial aspects of the Principate, that the historian was compelled to *prudentia*,[44] that this fact itself indicates that this regime could still destroy those who unveiled their minds?[45]

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[41] E.g. Roche (2011a), 11–4.

[42] We also think of the difficulty in identifying the views of Tacitus in the *Dialogus*; e.g. Dressler (2013).

[43] Cf. Sailor (2004), about the *Agricola*.

[44] This notion of *prudentia* has a long history in the studies of Tacitus and was specifically highlighted by Tacitism from its outset; Claire (2013) 492–5; Cuissard (2014).

[45] Cf. also Duarte Joly and Faversani (2013) 145.

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