Secrets of Power:
Tacitus on the Soul of Despots and Despotism

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At a time of cynicism, demagoguery, and extreme partisanship in our politics, the strength, and even the wisdom, of republican institutions may no longer seem self-evident. In ages past, when political liberty itself became a matter of debate and doubt, there has been one thinker all sides turned to for insight: Tacitus (AD 56 - 120), the great analyst, biographer, and historian of the Roman empire, the longest lasting despotism in the West. He has inspired revolutionaries by exposing tyrants to the infamy they deserve (iii.65.1),* but also attracted apologists of absolute monarchy with his lessons in *realpolitik* and the "secrets of power" (*arcana imperii,* ii.36.1). He is the classical author favored by the founders of the American republic and its philosopher Montesquieu, yet also a byword for Machiavellianism. Nor is that duality the only measure of his breadth. The master psychologist of tyrants, Tacitus lays bare the workings of their souls—but also, more painfully, our own: he shows how even the cruelest tyrants win adherents and at times popular support by inciting envy and mockery of the respectable and providing gifts and licentious entertainments ("bread and circuses") to urban masses having no military or political responsibilities of their own.

But this is only prelude to a sweeping but sobering reflection on how easily a not unhealthy human ambition for honor and success, turns, in a despotism, into a servile willingness to flatter the tyrant, the fountain of rewards and punishments, and further his profitable injustice (e.g., vi.8-9, cf. i.24.2, iv.2.3). The reigns of terror spread through numerous enablers, above all accusers and informers (*delatores*), a new, restless, hungry class (i.74.2). It is after reflecting on Tacitus that one may begin to realize how ignorant one has been about the most basic things, things that one takes for granted, such as the decency of those around one and one's country as a whole. What would things look like under the absolute rule of a tyrant? How would one's colleagues and neighbors, how would we behave? For in the reigns of terror, even friends and relatives cannot be trusted (iv.68-70, xv.56.4, and esp. xiii.19.1) and pity is banished (vi.19.2-3). These are possibilities one likely would not guess, not with sharpness and confidence, if one did not experience or witness them. A great historian such as Tacitus shows us a very wide range of these possibilities, and indicates the permanent human characteristics which underlie them. One might argue that all of history's awful, murderous regimes could have been prevented if those who founded or made them had had the benefit of an education from such wise observers when they were young. And of course, many of the best regimes, including our own, were founded, and perpetuated, by people who had learned in this way.

Furthermore, the moral and political prejudices of our regime can disguise our worst defects. Tacitus understands liberty and republican self-government to depend on very different virtues and beliefs than we as modern liberals would. His account of the failure of the Roman republic and the expansion of the cruelty and depravity of the Caesars looks in large part to the corruption of traditional mores and religion (especially in Rome, where decadent and cruel entertainments replace civic activity), the fear in the emperors arising from their lack of legitimacy, the dishonor and mockery of respectable citizens, and the progressive liberation from laws and restraints in rulers and ruled. That is, his understanding of political liberty rests on positive demands and virtues, such as spiritedness, self-discipline, toughness, constancy, honorableness, shame, and the straitjacket of law and mores (especially those governing family and sexual relations). We on the other hand, and simplifying to bring out the contrast, tend to think of liberty as a negative matter, our individual rights to live as we wish, rather than as a test of our character and virtues, or of our devotion to law and faith (—faith itself being only a private matter today). Whatever the successes and benefits of our modern liberal and individualistic orientation—and of course in many respects we stand at the peak of human achievement—it may blind us to how we, and especially potential tyrants, would actually behave once the restraints of law and faith (that we take for granted) fade (vi.51.3, xiii.47, xiv.13.2). Tacitus is, after all, much harsher in his assessment of human nature than we are: The need for severe restraints on man arises largely from his insight into the never extinguished and insatiable drive for mastery and dominion at the root of human nature (iii.26-28; ii.88.2).

Students wonder, how could the relentless cruelty, absurd paranoia, and frenzied bloodbaths that Tacitus describes, have taken over—and for so long!—that same nation and civilization that, in literature alone, gave us Ovid, Virgil, and Horace? Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch? — and of course Tacitus himself. How could monsters rise—criminal sociopaths—not just once, but again and again (vi.48.2), to supreme power over millions: Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus, Caracalla? Was it the lead in their water? But then we must be surprised that the highly advanced nation that gave us Kant and Goethe, Bach and Beethoven, also gave us a Hitler. Perhaps our surprise results from a failure to understand not the exception, but the rule: human nature then and now.

Learning the lessons of Tacitus, however hard and bleak, may turn out to be the best defense and hope we have against the threats we now face. As the heirs of a freedom that has endured for centuries, we may be tempted to take it for granted. Even though many of us can now see signs on the wall that our regime is less strong than it used to be, what comes next? We see the decay, but Tacitus stands alone in showing us what is likely to follow from that decay—and with unrivalled clarity. And perhaps that will strengthen our resolve to support our free country, to foster the "new birth of freedom" of which our greatest President spoke. But even if it were not given to us to perpetuate the blessings of liberty and justice to future generations—as "this too shall pass"—understanding our failure would itself be no small gift that we can win for ourselves and pass on to our heirs, the gift that Tacitus passed down to us.

* All references are to book, chapter, and section number of the *Annals of Tacitus*.