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Was Janus Dousa a Tacitist? Rhetorical and Conceptual Approaches to the Reception of Classical Historiography and Its Political Significance

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Was Janus Dousa a Tacitist?

Rhetorical and conceptual approaches to the reception of classical historiography and its political significance

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The presence of Cornelius Tacitus in the prose historiography of the Leiden humanist Janus Dousa the Elder (1545-1604) is overwhelming. I will give a random example to illustrate my point: Dousa's discussion of the attitude assumed by the Frankish emperor Lothair I (817-855) towards the Norman invasions of the ninth century:¹

And is it surprising, that they [that is, the Normans] caused fear among the Franks themselves too, if a multitude of so many people came together, poured over the entire world like a deluge, and committed rape, robbery, murder, and arson openly and without punishment? And this precisely at a time when the border zones of the Empire were treated carelessly, because the rulers as much as their subjects set their minds on civil war ('conuersis ad ciuile bellum Principum iuxta ac prouincialium animis, Imperii extrema sine cura habebantur'); consequently, these areas lay exposed to plundering and vengeance. Lest anything should be absent from the misery, the emperor Lothair himself hit the peak of greediness, so that, when the defection of allies and the frequent desertion of his subjects made him despair of his own power, he turned from a Christian prince almost into a semi-pagan and a sham-defender of the public interest, and he thought it would be more desirable for himself and more conducive to his good fortune if the power of any foreign people would increase against the authority of his brothers ('aduersus fratrum suorum potentiam cuiusuis exotici populi vires crescere'), rather than if he would be less influential himself.

At least one sentence in this passage testifies to Dousa's heavy indebtedness to Tacitus. In expressing his critique of Lothair, Dousa borrows a large phrase from the first book of the *Historiae* ('conuersis ad ciuile bellum animis externa

¹ Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 117-118: 'Et mirum [...] si, in vnum aggregata tot conuenarum gentium multitudine, vniuerso terrarum orbi veluti diluuium quodam superfusi, stupra, rapinas, caedes atque incendia palam atque impune exercuerint, ipsis etiam Francis formidabiles? hoc praesertim tempore; quo, conuersis ad ciuile bellum Principum iuxta ac prouincialium animis, Imperii extrema sine cura habebantur: praedae pariter ac poenae exposita: cupientissimo (ne quid malis deesset) ipso Imperatore Lothario: vt qui, rebus suis defectiones sociorum ac crebra subditorum transfugia diffisus, de Christiano Principe tantum non semipaganus, ac publicae causae Praeuaricator factus; aduersus fratrum suorum potentiam cuiusuis exotici populi vires crescere, quam ipse minus valere, optatius sibi ac fortunae suae conducibilis existimaret.'

sine cura habebantur).² Probably the most obvious interpretation of such a dependence would be that we have to do here with another exponent of the well-known Tacitist fashion that made its presence felt in the second half of the sixteenth century. Although such a view would be far from spectacular, it would have some relevance for the theme of this volume, because in the slipstream of Giuseppe Toffanin the mainstream of scholars in the fields of Neo-Latin literature and the history of political thought regards the reception of Tacitus primarily as an ideological phenomenon, as the appropriation of a philosophical system of ideas about politics that can be deduced from the work of the great Roman historian.

In this article, I wish to exemplify an alternative to such an approach within the domain of Renaissance historiography, and to provide it with some theoretical underpinning. Taking my cue from an article by Mark Morford about Justus Lipsius' *Politica*, I will try to show that the way humanist historians dealt with their classical predecessors is certainly conditioned by political factors, but often in a fundamentally eclectic and rhetorical, rather than synthesizing and dialectical manner.

My test case will be the work of a politically highly engaged historian, philologist, and poet: Janus Dousa the Elder. I will mention only a few facts from his public career: in 1574, Dousa was charged with the defence of the city of Leiden against the Spanish troops. In the years 1584 and 1585, he participated in embassies to queen Elizabeth of England. In 1591, he was appointed a member of the Supreme Court.³ Precisely during these crucial years of the Dutch Revolt and Dousa's most active period as a public figure, he wrote the *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales*, a history of Holland from the time of Julius Caesar until the death of count Floris II in 1122. Dousa had been commissioned to do so by Leiden University, and he was assisted in this task by his son of the same name, who made considerable contributions.⁴ When the book was finally published in 1601, Dousa was generously rewarded by the Estates of Holland; an event which testifies to the strong appeal the work must have had for the authorities.⁵

² Tacitus, *Historiae* 1,79.

³ For the biographical facts, see Heesakkers, *Praecedanea Dousana*; Heesakkers – Reinders, *Genoeglijk bovenal*; Vermaseren, "De werkzaamheid"; Blok – Molhuysen (eds.), *Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek*, vol. 6, 425-429. Dousa himself describes the main outlines of his political career up to 1593 in Dousa, *Epistolae apologeticae duae* 3-10.

⁴ In fact, Janus Dousa the Younger would probably have written the entire volume, if he had not passed away in 1596.

⁵ Although the *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* have been somewhat overshadowed by Dousa's poetic history of 1599, there exists a modest amount of scholarly literature about the work:

In order to make a reasonable case for my thesis about the reception of classical historiography, I will first focus on the well-known concept of 'Tacitism', and point out why it does not suffice for an explanation of Dousa's reception practices. Subsequently, I will propose an alternative approach, which takes the use of classical texts as selective and subservient to the work's political rhetoric. Finally, I will argue that these procedures are best understood against the cultural background of early modern practices of reading history.

The Concept of Tacitism: Problematic Aspects

As point of departure for my argument I will take the scholarly notion of Tacitism, because this is the dominant conceptual frame to think about the political significance of classical historiography in the early modern period, and because Tacitus is among the authors Dousa most intensively engaged with in his prose historiography. The term Tacitism began to enjoy currency after the publication of Giuseppe Toffanin's classic study *Machiavelli e il 'Tacitismo'* in 1921, and started to gain strong momentum in the 1960s.⁶

Despite a lot of criticism, Toffanin's concept of Tacitism is still the prevailing instrument to describe Tacitus' role in early modern debates about politics. For instance, it was largely maintained in the important studies of Peter Burke, Else-Lilly Etter, and Kenneth C. Schellhase.⁷ It can be characterized as follows. To start with, it denotes a mode of processing the reading of the Tacitean corpus, in which the reader abstracts a philosophical system from large parts of, or even the entire, narrative. This synthesis belongs to the domain of political thought. The number of such systems, or ideologies, is represented as limited: Toffanin distinguishes between disguised Machiavellianism, or Black Tacitism, disguised republicanism, or Red Tacitism, and anti-Machiavellianism expressed as anti-Tacitism, or Critical Tacitism.

Within this frame of thought, it is difficult for a number of reasons to call Dousa a Tacitist. In the first place this is so because Dousa's reception of Tacitus is heavily contaminated. This is clearly visible in the passage quoted at the beginning of this article. Dousa does not only weave Tacitean phraseology into his text, but he also borrows extensively from the work of Sallust

Kampinga, *De opvattingen* (especially 25-37, 141-147); Vermaseren, "De werkzaamheid" 65-66; Waterbolk, "Zeventiende-eeuwens"; Heesakkers, "De Neolatijnse historiografie" (especially 394-397); Heesakkers & Reinders, *Genoeglijk bovenal* 66-71. In a very recent collection of articles devoted to the work of Dousa, the prose history hardly receives any attention: Lefèvre – Schäfer (eds.), *Ianus Dousa* 175-177, 189-193, 279-280.

⁶ Toffanin, *Machiavelli e il 'Tacitismo'*. For some important later studies, see the next footnote.

⁷ Etter, *Tacitus in der Geistesgeschichte*; Burke, "Tacitism"; Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought*.

(‘cuiusuis opes uoluisse contra illius potentiam crescere’) – an author Dousa knew very well, because he had edited the fragments of Sallust’s *Historiae* in 1580.⁸ In addition, it is possible to detect smaller fragments deriving from many other authors, Cicero and Florus in this case.⁹ There inheres a problem in this practice of multiple reception, viz. that it is unlikely that one and the same ideology is extracted from such widely different authors as Tacitus, Sallust, and Livy – all of whom are often implicitly quoted in Dousa’s prose *Annales*. Even if reception of classical historiography would be primarily about concepts, therefore, Dousa’s case precludes the supposition of a writer abstracting one philosophy from one historian; the equally pervasive presence of several, differing models necessitates at least the hypothesis of an eclectic process of selection and harmonization.

Another reason for the limited usefulness of the concept Tacitism for my present purposes is that it does not seem possible to assign one of the ideological categories constructed by Toffanin to Dousa’s reception of Tacitus in a plausible way.¹⁰ Quite clearly, Dousa is not an opponent of monarchy. The following text example clearly shows how Tacitean and Sallustian phrases are employed to praise the single-headed rule of the first count of Holland,¹¹ Dirk I.¹²

For our Dirk never ventured to abuse impudently or wantonly – in the manner of those who turn military service into licentiousness (‘more eorum qui militiam in lasciuam vertunt’) – the gifts of favourable for-

⁸ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 17.

⁹ Cicero, *Epistulae familiares* 8,11,1: ‘publicae causae praevaricator’; Florus, *Epitome de Tito Livio* 3,19,6 [2,7]: ‘ne quid malis deesset’. For the combined reception of Tacitus with other classical authors, see Salmon, “Cicero and Tacitus”; id., “Stoicism and Roman Example”.

¹⁰ The problems that occur when one tries to apply Toffanin’s categories were noticed before by Karl Enekel, who suggested to do away with them altogether: Enekel – Novikova, “Nieuwe wereld” 45-47.

¹¹ It is uncertain when Dirk I precisely lived and ruled. Dousa thought he assumed power in 913.

¹² Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 377-378: ‘Neque enim DIEDERICVS noster ex ambitione sua procaciter aut petulanter (more eorum qui militiam in lasciuam vertunt) Fortunae blandientis muneribus abuti vnquam, seque ac spes suas corrumpere in futurum sustinuit: neque nouae potentiae accessionem ad desidiae instrumenta aut voluptates corporis referre animum induxit: sed vero noscere Territorij sui limites, nosci subditis, frequens ad signa et instruendo bello intentus, delectus habere, praesidia opportunis locis disponere, simulque anxius nunquam non festinare, satagere, consilia atque insidias hostium antecapere: denique nihil apud se remissum, neque apud illos tutum pati.’ The Latin phrases mentioned in my translation are taken from Tacitus, *Agricola* 5: ‘nec Agricola licenter, more iuuenum qui militiam in lasciuam uertunt [...] sed noscere prouinciam, nosci exercitui’; Tacitus, *Historiae* 4,69: ‘instruendo bello intentus’; Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum* 88: ‘consilia et insidias eorum anteuenire, nihil apud se remissum neque apud illos tutum pati’.

tune out of ambition, or to undermine himself and his hope in the future; he did not set his mind on assessing the growth of his power by his possibilities for idleness or by his bodily pleasures, but rather on knowing the limits of his territory, on being known by his subjects ('sed vero noscere Territorij sui limites, nosci subditis'); and, frequently inspecting the banners and diligently preparing for war ('instruendo bello intentus'), on recruiting soldiers, building fortifications on suitable places, always anxious to hasten, to bustle about, to anticipate the enemies' plans and ambushes ('consilia atque insidias hostium antecapere'); in a word, he did not allow any slackness on his own side, and no security on that of the enemy ('denique nihil apud se remissum, neque apud illos tutum pati').

On the other hand, my first quotation clearly shows that Dousa certainly did use Tacitus and Sallust to censure princes; however, this is not because they had failed to act in an opportunistic manner or in accordance with *virtù*, but because they did not fulfill their moral duty of protecting their subjects. It would be senseless, therefore, to attribute to Dousa Machiavellianism or reason of state. In fact, an epigram written by Dousa about an unspecified booklet well reflects his attitude towards the philosophy of the Florentine: 'You, who favour tyrants, members of Machiavelli's school; you will also favour this booklet, which trains tyrants.'¹³

Even if Dousa censures Machiavelli, Critical Tacitism is probably the least suitable label for the prose *Annales*. Dousa never says anything unfavourable about Tacitus. On the contrary, the Roman historian is one of the main authorities on which the argumentation of the *Annales* is built, in the first place as a mine of information about the Batavian past, but also as a source of political understanding. For example, Dousa highlights one of his Tacitus quotations by the following marginal note: 'As has been observed rightly and with political insight by Tacitus.'¹⁴

Instead of all these possible Tacitean ideologies, Dousa's work features a conceptual framework to describe politics that owes more to sixteenth-century political discussions than to any classical author. The central concept in the prose *Annales* is liberty, which includes both a community's freedom from external constraints and the absence of oppression. A point of special attention is freedom of religion. Dousa supports the view that this liberty of the

¹³ Dousa, *Echo sive lusus imaginis iocosae* f. 27r: 'Vos, Tyrannis qui favetis, Machiavelli e Schola; / Huic favebitis Libello, qui Tyrannos instruit.' For the very limited reception of and the general aversion to Machiavelli's work in the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands at this time, see Haitsma Mulier, *Het Nederlandse gezicht*.

¹⁴ Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 253: 'Vti rite ac politice a Tacito observatum.' Similar remarks about Tacitus are found at Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 87, 243, 368.

state and the citizens ought to be protected by the government. Its opposite is tyranny or slavery, a situation occurring when rulers indulge in their own desires and violate the public interest and the law. It is allowed, Dousa assumes, to resist such tyranny by force of arms.

The intellectual background of such ideas is not classical republicanism, Machiavellian monarchism, or a critique of Tacitus, but rather the contemporary political thought of the Dutch Revolt. How topical Dousa's concept of liberty was in the late sixteenth century can be demonstrated by means of a brief passage from the so-called *Plakkaat van Verlatinge* of 1581, the official deposition of king Philip II, which has often been described as the Dutch counterpart to the American Declaration of Independence. After a short exposition about the ideal prince as a shepherd guarding his sheep, the central argument of the *Plakkaat* to justify the unprecedented move of deposing a lawful ruler is expressed as follows:¹⁵

If he does not act in this way, but instead of protecting his subjects, tries to oppress them, to burden them excessively, to take away their ancient freedom ('vrijheit'), privileges, and customary rights, and to command and use them like slaves ('slaven'), he should not be regarded as a prince, but as a tyrant ('tyran'). Then his subjects have every right and reason not to acknowledge him as their prince anymore – especially when the States of the country have deliberated about it – and to leave him and legally choose someone else as sovereign in his place for their protection.

In both texts from Dousa's prose history cited above, some of the ideas that can be encountered in the *Plakkaat* are applied to Lothair's tyranny and the good rule of Dirk I. In the following example, it can be seen how Dousa formulates a critique of Norman despotism in Frisia after the death of bishop

¹⁵ *Placcaert vande Staten generael* f. Aij r-v: 'Ende so wanneer hy sulcks niet en doet, maer in stede van sijne ondersaten te beschermen, de selve soect te verdrucken, t'ouerlasten, heure oude vrijheit, priuilegien, ende oude hercomen te benemen, ende heur te gebieden ende gebruycken als slaven, moet ghehouden worden niet als Prince, maer als een Tyran ende voor sulcks nae recht ende redene mach ten minsten van sijne ondersaten, besondere by deliberatie vande Staten vanden Lande, voor egeen Prince meer bekennt, maer verlaten, ende een ander in sijn stede tot beschermenisse van henlieden, voor ouerhoofft, sonder misbruycken, gecosen werden.' For a facsimile of this document with an extensive introduction, see Mout (ed.), *Plakkaat van verlatinge*. For the wider context of political discourse in the Low Countries at the end of the sixteenth century, see Van Gelderen, *The Political Thought* 146-160.

Ludger in 809¹⁶ along exactly the same lines of thought, but without the classical allusions:

After the death of bishop Ludger, the Normans practiced their tyranny ('tyrannis') in the inner parts of Frisia even more violently than they were used to do, with beastly rather than barbarous rage; everywhere, towns and municipalities were plundered or razed to the ground, the inhabitants carried away in slavery ('seruitus'); there was no respect for either sex or any sacred order, age was by no means considered; pastors, priests, monks were stripped of their ornaments and killed, mostly out of hatred of Christianity and religion, which they wanted to be abolished and eradicated in absolutely every way, viz. so that no further place whatsoever would be left for a renewed sprouting out of twigs.

This train of thought, which underlies the representation of history in the entire prose *Annales*, largely runs parallel to contemporary political thought about, and justification of, the Dutch Revolt, which Dousa himself had described on an earlier occasion as 'throwing off the yoke of Alva's despotism ('dominatio') from our necks and taking up arms against the Spaniards for the sake of public liberty ('publica Libertas').'¹⁷ By employing in his historiography the complex of ideas just described, Dousa thus imposed a highly topical frame of reference on the early past of his country – a frame that has little to do with either republicanism or Machiavellianism, let alone a critique of Tacitus.

From a Conceptual to a Rhetorical Approach

It seems, therefore, that Dousa's engagement with classical historiography and Tacitus in particular cannot be adequately described with a notion like Tacitism, which supposes a systematic synthesis and borrowing of political thought, and only allows for a limited number of ideologies that can be drawn from an author. This does not at all mean, however, that Dousa's reception of classical historiography is politically insignificant. On the contrary, the writings of Tacitus and Sallust in particular are clearly entangled in the political texture

¹⁶ Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 157: 'Post Lutgeri scilicet Praesulis decessum [...] Normannos tyrannidem suam solito etiam violentius, in ipsis Frisiae visceribus belluina potius quam barbarica rabie exercuisse: direptis passim, vel excisis penitus oppidis ac municipiis, incolis in seruitutem abductis: nulla cuiusquam aut sexus aut Sacrae Ordinis reuerentia, nulla aetatis habita ratione. [...] Parochi, Sacerdotes, Monachi non ornamentis suis modo, sed et vita pariter exuti: Christiani nominis odio ac Religionis maxime, quam imprimis extinctam ac modis prorsus omnibus eradicationem cupiebant, videlicet, ne restibili stolonum fruticationi ulterius porro locus aliquis relinqueretur.'

¹⁷ Dousa, *Epistolae apologeticae duae* 3: 'ALBANAEE Dominationis iugum ceruicibus nostris depulsum, proque publica Libertate arma in Hispanos sumpta.'

of the prose *Annales*, though on different rhetorical levels than the purely conceptual. In order to support this hypothesis, I will demonstrate the two principal ways in which such classical presences contribute to Dousa's political rhetoric.

But before I can do so, I should make one general remark about Dousa's concrete procedures of reception. The most notable feature of Dousa's imitation practice is his habit of drawing long phrases from classical texts, usually without mentioning their provenance. As I have already shown in detail, this form of imitation can be easily shown, whereas I have not been able to find clear indications that Dousa imitates the distinctive vocabulary, syntactic hallmarks, or narrative patterns of a particular author.

Within the rhetorical design of the prose *Annales*, the borrowed phraseology seems to fulfill at least two functions. First of all, Dousa plunders authors like Tacitus and Sallust especially because of those sneering phrases that he can use to voice evaluation of the historical protagonists, as long as they can be fitted into his political frame of reference. It is on this point that I might easily transfer Mark Morford's analysis of Lipsius' *Politica* (1589) to the work of Dousa, which is certainly a good match for 'the sustained thoroughness with which Lipsius subordinated the words of Tacitus to his own designs.'¹⁸ In other words, Dousa carefully selects and transforms a large number of phrases from classical historiography in order to make possible a seamless integration of this material into his narrative, thus forging a fluent and intellectually coherent account of his country's past that is both strongly rooted in the classical tradition and expressive of contemporary political thought.

Let me give a few examples. In the passage about emperor Lothair I, it can be seen how Dousa employs Sallust's and Tacitus' cynical psychological observations about selfishness and make-believe to underscore his point that Lothair was a tyrant. The same technique is used in some passages for a critique of the Normans.¹⁹ Perhaps more surprisingly, Dousa even succeeds in casting his

¹⁸ Morford M., "Tacitean Prudentia" 144.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* 51-53: 'Quod genus hominum iniquies atque indomitum, coeloque ac salo suo acrius animatum, quam caeterae subiectiores Austro nationes ... Auaritiae luxuriaequae materia per bella et raptus quaerebatur; odium Christiani nominis obtentui erat ... neque deerant incentores, turbatis rebus alacres et per incerta tutissimi; levissimus quisque Danorum ... extremae prorsus ignaviae arbitrati, sudore acquirere quod sanguine parari posset ... [periculum intendere] iis praesertim, penes quos aurum et opes; praecipuae bellorum causae.' This passage contains quotations from Tacitus, *Germania* 14: 'materia munificentiae per bella et raptus ... pigrum quin immo et iners uidetur sudore acquirere quod possis sanguine parare'; id., *Germania* 29: 'ipso adhuc terrae suae solo et caelo acrius animantur'; idem, *Historiae* 1,88: 'levissimus quisque ... turbatis rebus alacres et per incerta tutissimi'; idem, *Historiae* 3,45: 'super insitam ferociam et Romani

description of the counterpart to Viking vices – the brave protection of one's subjects – in a Sallustian-Tacitean mould. This can be seen in the passage about count Dirk I. In this way, classical historiography fashions an authoritative idiom to express judgments about historical characters that are informed by a contemporary frame of thought.

Secondly, I wish to propose to take into account the original context of the quotations, because a clear pattern can be discerned in the particular contexts that are evoked. Emperor Lothair and his brothers, who allow their own interests and desires to prevail over the well-being of their subjects, even if this results in civil war, are associated with the ruthless Roman generals of the Year of the Four Emperors. The Normans, who tyrannized over the Low Countries 'with beastly rather than barbarous rage', as Dousa put it, are associated with the savage peoples of Germany, Britain, and Africa. The characterization of Dirk as the redeemer of his subjects, on the other hand, is closely modelled on the defenders of Roman civilization against these brutes: Gaius Marius and Gnaeus Julius Agricola. The Tacitean and Sallustian idioms are thus reinforced by the evocation of powerful figures that might well be capable of affecting the reader's emotions.²⁰

I will be the first to admit that on this point imitative practices do have some relevance for the conceptual level of rhetoric as well: Dousa certainly avails himself of strong notions from Roman politics like the rightful conquest of the barbarian and the horrors of civil war by evoking archetypal characters who embody these concepts. On the whole, however, the important point is that even if the intertextual presence of characters who incarnate such ideas can be detected, its effect is usually made subservient to the specific rhetorical design of the text in which it can be found. On a theoretical level, this implies a rhetoric of intertextuality that conceives of reception as a selective process in which only a limited number of recognizable elements from a model text is appropriated and subsequently processed in such a way as to facilitate its insertion in a new textual whole.²¹ Consequently, there is always a transformation from source to target text, as much on the conceptual as on the linguistic level.

nominis odium'; idem, *Historiae* 4,74: 'penes quos aurum et opes, praecipuae bellorum causae'; Sallust, *Historiae* fr. 1,7 Maurenbrecher: 'inquiet atque indomitum'.

²⁰ About the importance of intertextual allusions for political rhetoric, also see the contributions of Marc Laureys and Christoph Pieper to this volume.

²¹ For a theoretical underpinning of such a rhetorical approach to intertextuality, see Jenny, "The Strategy of Form"; Genette, *Palimpsestes*.

The Cultural Background: Procedures of Reading

Finally, I would like to posit that the particular shape this process of transformation takes – the way Dousa selects subtexts and twists them into a new argument – is to a great extent conditioned by contemporary practices of reading.

Recent studies in the history of reading have demonstrated that many early modern people did not read books in a linear and analytical fashion. Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, for instance, showed that their reading was often eclectic and goal-oriented, and typically involved an active reinterpretation of the text in order to render it useful for the present. Keen as they were on exemplary narratives, shrewd observations, and elegant expressions, readers closely examined selected passages, jotting down the lessons they learned in the margins of their copy or in commonplace books.²² This was precisely the way of reading advocated by theoretical and pedagogical treatises, which make clear that from the very beginning the extraction of excerpts was recommended as the main strategy of reading historiography. Together with the scrutinizing of these writers as models of style, the organization of examples of laudable and reprehensible conduct in collections of commonplaces (*loci communes*) under different thematic headings constituted the quintessential means of putting works of history to good use.²³

Such an approach must have seemed particularly suitable for the works of Tacitus in view of his frequent use of maxims. Thus Johannes Bernartius, a historian from Mechlin who published a manual on reading history in 1593, recommended Tacitus among other things because ‘he does not write all this in an unadorned series of words, but in a style that is full of golden maxims (‘sententiae’) that guide one’s deeds and life.’²⁴ In a cultural environment so prone to excerption and quotation, an author who was thought of in such a way was of course very likely to be reduced to anthologies of aphorisms. In turn, such collections of phrases could be used as a resource of phraseology to

²² Grafton – Jardine, “Studied for Action”. For early modern readers of historiography, also see Sherman, *John Dee* 72-73, 77-78, 90-95; Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics* 204-208; Woolf, *Reading History* 79-131; Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions* 84, 95-101, 196-197, 215-217, 318-320.

²³ For the role of historiography in education, see Landfester, *Historia magistra vitae* 54-78. For commonplace books, see Grafton, *What Was History?* 207-229.

²⁴ Bernartius, *De utilitate legendae historiae* 48: ‘nec nudo haec omnia verborum contextu, sed dictione plena aureis, actiones, vitamque dirigentibus sententiis.’ For the attention of sixteenth-century scholars for Tacitus’ *sententiae*, see Waszink, “Shifting Tacitisms” 86-91; Burke, “A Survey” 149. Needless to say that modern scholars also recognize Tacitus’ strong predilection for maxims: see for instance, Sinclair, *Tacitus the Sententious Historian*.

be incorporated in new compositions, a technique that is well described by the classic metaphor of imitation as culling honey from various flowers.²⁵

By sheer luck, we possess data proving that this was precisely the way Dousa collected his Tacitean and Sallustian phraseology. In a letter from 1582, Dousa writes to Lambert van der Burch about the progress of his eleven year old son at university:²⁶

He causes me wonderful convenience, not only by copying manuscripts or taking dictations (which he regards as entertainment), but also by heaping together historiographical phrases peculiar to Tacitus and Livy, with whom he has been made familiar by his frequent attendance of Lipsius' courses. In addition, I have enlarged this illustrious committee with Gaius Sallustius.

In the same letter, Dousa refers to his son's work as translations of middle Dutch historiography into Latin, which supply him with words 'cursorily drawn from Sallustian or Tacitean sources, at any rate, and arranged, as it were, under some commonplace headings (*locos quosdam communes*) as an exercise for children.'²⁷ Most probably, then, a more or less systematic plundering of classical historiography according to the method of the commonplace book was at the basis of Dousa's rich use of phraseology from this corpus of texts.

Another early modern habit of reading that should be taken into account as a background to Dousa's political use of classical historians is the practice of associating literary characters with historical persons, of searching for a similitude between past and present (*similitudo temporum*). There is probably no literary genre in which this procedure is more prominently visible than encomiastic rhetoric, which prescribes a *comparatio* of the person praised with famous people, preferably those who figure in classical literature. Nevertheless, it is

²⁵ See, for instance, Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 84,3: 'Apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari, quae uagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quidquid attulere disponunt ac per fauos digerunt et, ut Vergilius noster ait, liquentia mella stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas.' For the history of this metaphor in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern era, see Stackelberg, "Das Bienengleichnis".

²⁶ Vermaseren, "De werkzaamheid" 85: 'Is mirabiles mihi commoditates praebet, non in apographis conficiendis solum aut excipiendis dictatis (quae quidem ille pro ludo habet), verum adeo in phrasibus historicis coacervandis, Tacito utique ac Livio peculiaribus, quos auctores familiares illi assidua Lipsianarum lectionum frequentatio fecit. Ego duumviris istis C. insuper Sallustium adstruxi.'

²⁷ Vermaseren, "De werkzaamheid" 85: 'ut verba solum ac voces in partem suppeditet mihi, a Sallustianis aut Cornelianis certe fontibus saltuatim petitas, velutque in locos quosdam communes puerili meditatione digestas.'

also a main ingredient of narrative interpretation. A good example is Lipsius' 1572 Jena oration on Tacitus:²⁸

How much is to be found in him, which is relevant to civil matters, public affairs, jurisprudence? How many parallels to our time, like in the similarity of a similar tyranny? Well then, call to mind his Tiberius, whose entire existence was cunning, ambiguous, deceitful, and dripping with continual murders and the blood of innocent citizens. That looks like a clear image of that bloodstained and raging tyrant, the duke of Alba, doesn't it?

Such an associative mode of reading is also indispensable for a good understanding of Dousa's prose *Annales*. I have already shown with some examples that Dousa's rhetoric of liberty is strengthened by conjuring up Roman heroes and anti-heroes behind the medieval characters of his work.²⁹ Mental connections are also important on another level of reading, though. And this is well demonstrated by an epigram Dousa published two years after the prose history and which seems to provide an interesting key to its interpretation. 'William of Orange is a match for Dirk: the latter was the founder of the county, the former of your freedom, my Batavian country.'³⁰ Just as Dirk's behaviour should be seen in the light of Marius' and Agricola's deeds, therefore, the liberator from Spanish tyranny should be mutually connected with the redeemer from Norman despotism.

Finally, this analogical mode of thought also plays a role in the perception of the author. The use of classical phraseology presents the early modern writer as the like of his classical model and thus enhances his literary prestige. This effect was duly recognized by one of Dousa's colleagues at Leiden University, Bonaventura Vulcanius, who supplied a laudatory epigram for Dousa's prose *Annales*, in which he observed: 'But Janus Dousa, both the father and the son, gave back to Batavian history the life that had been snatched away from it,

²⁸ Kromayer (ed.), *Iusti Lipsii orationes* 35: 'Iam vero quam multa in eo, ad res civiles, ad motus communes, ad iurisprudentiam pertinentia, ut in similitudine similis Tyrannidis, quam multa exempla temporum nostrorum? Age vel Tyberium eius tibi propone, cuius omnis vita astuta, anceps, fallax, continuis caedibus, et sanguine innocentium civium madens, nonne expressa imago sanguinolenti illius, et furiosi Tyranni, Ducis Albani?'

²⁹ How natural it must have seemed in the early modern period to connect Tacitus' strong, almost archetypal characters like Tiberius, Nero, and Agrippina to contemporary persons is well demonstrated by Rubiés, "Nero in Tacitus"; Simhon, "*Similitudo temporum*".

³⁰ Dousa, *Echo sive lusus imaginis iocosa* f. 31^v: 'Par Didrico Aurasius; Comitatus conditor ille, / Hic Libertatis (terra Batava) tuae.'

while each of them writes with historical faithfulness and is esteemed as the near-equal of Tacitus and of you, Sallust.³¹

Conclusion

In this article, I have made a case for the idea that we should not limit the political relevance of Tacitus or any other classical author in the early modern period to systematic digestions of his work into fully elaborated political theories. I have shown why such an approach is not very helpful in the case of Dousa's use of classical material. Although implicit quotations from Tacitus are abundantly present in the *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales*, Dousa did not attempt to imitate one author in particular, but followed a distinctively eclectic method in selecting classical phraseology to be incorporated in his narrative. If Dousa was a Tacitist, it follows that he must have been, at the same time, a 'Sallustianist', a 'Ciceronianist', and a 'Livianist'. Moreover, none of the political interpretations of Tacitism outlined by Toffanin can be applied to Dousa's views in a convincing manner. Instead, Dousa's views on the politics of the past were in the first place shaped by discussions related to the Dutch Revolt.

This does not mean that the reception of classical historiography in early modern discourse is politically neutral. In order to demonstrate this, I have attempted to provide a tentative theoretical basis for an understanding of the phenomenon in rhetorical rather philosophical terms. Dousa carefully selects and adapts the phrases he wishes to incorporate in his narrative in order to guarantee the rhetorical coherence of his message. In addition, the quotations bring to mind the context from which they originally stemmed, and thus associate the heroes and villains of classical Rome with those of medieval Holland.

I have argued that such a way of subordinating a large and diverse amount of classical material to the persuasive design of a new text is closely connected with the reading practices of the sixteenth century. The method of excerpting noticeable passages in notebooks under commonplace headings is especially relevant here, because this habit allowed early modern writers to draw on a huge store of classical passages relevant to particular themes. In Dousa's case, there is concrete evidence that commonplace books constituted an important condition for his reception of Tacitus and Sallust. Moreover, intertextual composition was fostered by the notion that one era could be better understood in the light of another (*similitudo temporum*).

³¹ Dousa, *Bataviae Hollandiaeque annales* f. *4r: 'At Janus modo Dousa, Pater Natusque, Batavae / Ereptam historiae restituere animam. / Historicaque fide dum terse scribit vterque / Et Tacito suppar, et tibi Crispe cluit.'

Finally, I wish to note that the rhetorical understanding of reception advanced in this article does by no means exclude more philosophical explanations. I do think, however, that the dominance of the latter approach is due to an all-too-restricted focus on the genres of the commentary and the political treatise so far. The prototypical examples of such texts are Giovanni Botero's treatise *Della ragion di stato* (1589) and Carlo Pasquale's commentary on Tacitus (1581). For works like these, a conceptual analysis works fairly well, since a philosophical understanding of classical authors, Tacitus in particular, was often precisely their aim. If we turn to other genres with their own objectives, such as historiography or the oration, it could indeed be expected that the modalities of reception would be different. I hope to have exemplified this difference, and to have provided some thoughts about how to describe and explain the political functions of reception in humanist historiography.

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