A PICTURE WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: REVISITING BEDRIACUM (TACITUS *HISTORIES* 2.70)

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(2.70.1) inde Vitellius Cremonam flexit et spectato munere Caecinae insistere Bedriacensibus campis ac vestigia recentis victoriae lustrare oculis concupivit. foedum atque atrox spectaculum, intra quadragensimum pugnae diem lacera corpora, trunci artus, putres virorum equorumque formae, infecta tabo humus, protritis arboribus ac frugibus dira vastitas. (2.70.2) nec minus inhumana pars viae, quam Cremonenses lauru rosaque constraverant, exstructis altaribus caesisque victimis regium in morem; quae laeta in praesens mox perniciem ipsis fecere. (2.70.3) aderant Valens et Caecina monstrabantque pugnae locos: hinc inrupisse legionum agmen, hinc equites coortos, inde circumfusas auxiliorum manus; iam tribuni praefectique, sua quisque facta extollentes, falsa vera aut maiora vero miscebant. volgus quoque militum clamore et gaudio deflectere via, spatia certaminum recognoscere, aggerem armorum, strues corporum intueri mirari; et erant quos varia sors rerum lacrimaeque et misericordia subiret. (2.70.4) at non Vitellius flexit oculos nec tot milia insepultorum civium exhorruit: laetus ultro et tam propinquae sortis ignarus instaurabat sacrum dis loci.

From there Vitellius turned to Cremona, and, after viewing Caecina's gladiatorial show, he ardently desired to set foot on the battlefield of Bedriacum and survey the traces of his recent victory. It was a horrible and revolting sight, almost forty days after the battle—mangled corpses, severed limbs, and the rotting carcasses of men and horses, the ground infected with putrid blood, a dreadful devastation evident in the trampled trees and crops. The part of the road nearby was an equally inhuman spectacle: the Cremonese had paved it with laurel and roses, building altars and sacrificing victims as if for a king. These celebrations provided joy for the time being, but soon turned into their own destruction. Valens and Caecina were present, pointing out the hot spots of the battle: from there the legions charged, from there the cavalry attacked, from there the auxiliary forces outflanked the enemy. Now the tribunes and prefects, praising their own feats, were mixing falsehoods, truths, and exaggerations. The common soldiers too, left the main road crying out in joy, recognizing the familiar battlefield, staring, gaping at the heap of arms and the pile of corpses. There were some who were moved to tears and pity by the diverse lots of human affairs. Yet Vitellius did not avert his eyes, nor did he shudder at the thousands of Roman citizens lying unburied. He was actually happy, and, ignorant of his impending lot, he proceeded to offer a sacrifice to the gods of the place.[1]

1. All texts of Tacitus are from H. Heubner's Teubner edition (1978–83). All translations are mine. Citations by number alone (e.g., 2.70) should be taken to refer to the *Histories*.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SPECTACLE AT BEDRIACUM still holds the same eerie allure it did in April 69 C.E., when Vitellius first laid eyes upon it. This extraordinary episode, reported by Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and Tacitus, has been the object of many insightful discussions in recent years, most focusing on the *Histories*. Analysis has covered Tacitus' sources of imagery and phraseology, the relationship of this episode to motifs of spectacle in the *Histories* and the *Annals,* and the divergences between Tacitus and the other two ancient authors regarding the characterization of Vitellius.[2] Indeed, a common element in these fruitful studies is their concentration on the *princeps,* who is characterized decisively and unforgivably by his callous rejoicing at the sight of the dead. However, the importance of battle aftermaths in Roman authors, and particularly Tacitus, goes far beyond character portrayal.[3] Victoria Pagán has delineated a substantial *topos* of aftermath narratives, which different authors modify according to their political, literary, and moral agendas.[4] Tacitus' own account of Germanicus' visit to Teutoburg, the theater of the *clades Varriana* (*Ann.* 1.61–62), is one such meaningful narrative in the context of the *Annals*.[5] It summarizes Germanicus' geographical and political transgression of Tiberius' rule, thus foreshadowing his own demise. Simultaneously, it functions as a vehicle of narrative movement, surveying time before the beginning of *Annals* 1 and looking forward to accounts of foreign affairs later in the narrative.[6]

In this vein, I look at Bedriacum from a perspective that has been so far overlooked, despite its importance for Tacitus' reconstruction and interpretation of the events in *Histories* 1–3. First, instead of focusing on Vitellius, I discuss the distinct levels of various characters' visual consciousness of and engagement with the spectacle before them. These viewers, including army officers and soldiers, are absent from the parallel sources but add depth to the Tacitean narrative as a foil to Vitellius. Second, rather than focus on the visual qualities of Bedriacum, I examine the ways in which these various

2. On Tacitus' literary sources for Bedriacum, see Funari 1989, 584–94; on the structural role of this episode in the *Histories,* see Keitel 1992, 342–51. On its extensive similarities with the Teutoburg aftermath (*Ann.* 1.61–62) see Woodman 1998, 70–85, and *contra* Morgan 1992, 14–29. For a more detailed overview of the literature on this passage see Morgan 1992, 14.

3. I use the term "(battle) aftermath" and "aftermath narrative" as Pagán does (2000, 424): ". . . the term 'aftermath narrative' refers to the picture of a battlefield strewn with decaying corpses, weapons, horses, helmets, and debris. The field is inspected in broad daylight, usually on the morning after the battle, by the living, either the victorious generals or, less specifically, the survivors whose concern is to bury the dead."

4. For a substantial collection of aftermath narratives from Livy, Vergil, Sallust, Lucan, and Silius Italicus, see Pagán 2000, 425–34. For a detailed discussion of aftermath narratives in epic poetry, focusing on Lucan and Statius' *Thebaid,* see Lovatt 1999, 126–51.

5. For Teutoburg as a symbol of transgression, see Pagán 1999, 302–20, and, for a similar interpretation, O'Gorman 2000, 49–56.

6. Pagán (1999, 303) observes that the Teutoburg narrative is "the most extended, self-contained flashback in the *Annales,* and it reaches across the greatest length of time, six years." Hereafter I use the terms "story" and "narrative" in the sense established by Genette (1980, 27): "I propose to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content, to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself." For a comprehensive review of this distinction between "form" and "content" from Plato onwards, see Laird 1999, 46–78.

spectators reconstruct the raw spectacle through their rhetoric. Their utterances, mediating between vision and perception, override the experience of Bedriacum as Tacitus envisions it in his own authorial voice. The inability of these viewers to register what they look at is not merely a rhetorical claim. The phenomenon of selective perception, "the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought,"[7] was empirically familiar to the ancients. Various Greek and Roman texts assert that it is the mind, not the eyes, that truly sees.[8] Since the mind is often manipulated by rhetoric, it follows that vision too can become flawed under the influence of powerful but corrupt *logoi*.[9]

I contend that the interaction Tacitus delineates between perceptual and rhetorical dynamics at Bedriacum serves two main narrative goals. The first of these regards the action within the story, and corresponds roughly to an intratextual reading of this episode. Tacitus' contrast between raw spectacle and contrived speech exposes the artistry of the latter and its ability to misconstrue reality. This reality is supplemented by Tacitus' authorial voice, focusing on the political, military, and ethical concerns that this episode embodies throughout *Histories* 1–3. The oversimplified and glorified version of the battle, presented to the *princeps* by his subordinates, lulls him into a false sense of security that proves fatal to him and his party. Through Bedriacum, and episodes that surround it, the historian explicates Vitellius' ineffective leadership and subsequent defeat by the Flavians, as narrated in *Histories* 3. At the same time, the portrayal of the soldiers as more perceptive of the "true" message of Bedriacum activates general reflections on the inescapable legacy of Rome's civil wars.

Second, Tacitus explores his concerns regarding artistic and historical integrity, and this metaliterary process can be gauged by tracing the intertextual background of this episode. Ancient historians base their epistemological claims on two main methods: autopsy, that is, the historian's presence at the events narrated, and inquiry, the cross-examination of participants and the

7. Mack and Rock 1998, 25.

8. For definitions of phenomena such as voluntary/involuntary attention, levels of processing, and visual consciousness, see Mack and Rock 1998, 25–26. The authors argue that "there is no conscious perception at all in the absence of attention, and therefore no perceptual object can exist preattentively" (227). Because a viewer's attention can be manipulated in many different ways, it follows that conscious visual perception depends on more than the simple act of directing one's eyes to various stimuli. The notion that the mind, and not the eyes, is the true medium of vision, goes back to the Presocratics and has had a long *Nachleben*. See Epicharm. frag. 12 DK. Plato similarly argues that the *Nous* "sees" the Forms (*Ti.* 39e7–9), and so does Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.9.1. See also Arist. *Parv. nat.* 447b11–14 with Ross [1955] 2000, 228–34, and [*Pr.*] 903a20. This view is later taken by the Stoics (*SVF* 2.862–72). For recent theoretical discussions of spectatorship in historiography, see Davidson 1991, 10–24; Feldherr 1988. For the Roman cultural consciousness of the interplay between speech and vision, see Leach 1988, 3–24. For modern studies of these phenomena in psychology and art history, see Edelman 1999; Curreri-Alibrandi and Markowitz 1996; Gregory and Harris 1995.

9. This is Thucydides' famous digression on the deceptive language of *stasis* (3.82–85), and was very familiar to Tacitus' literary predecessors, most notably Sallust. See Hornblower 1991, 477–88 (ad loc.); Macleod 1983, 123–39; Lintott 1993, 25–32; Price 2001, 79–103. For the influence of this Thucydidean *topos* on the problem of nomenclature in Livy and Tacitus, see Keitel 1987, 75. For its application to the *Annals*, see O'Gorman 2000, 14–22. For the problematic *orationes rectae* of *Histories* 1–4, see Keitel 1987, 73–82; 1991, 2772–94; 1993, 39–58.

historian's own rational analysis.[10] Tacitus, being unable to apply personal autopsy at Bedriacum, bases his portrait of it on the rich rhetorical tradition of battle aftermaths. This treatment challenges us with a potential paradox: Tacitus' criticism of rhetoric as a means of distraction from the "truth," and his simultaneous aspiration to this truth through the use of highly stylized rhetoric, appear hardly reconcilable attitudes. Tacitus resolves this seeming incongruence by promoting his own version of Bedriacum as a politically revealing and morally edifying narrative.[11] Thus he suggests that creative reconstruction and historical accuracy are not mutually exclusive pursuits, if they are used with, and strive towards, proper *ethos.* Tacitus' confidence in his literary endeavor is hardly surprising, given that Roman expectations of veracity in a historical narrative radically differ from our own.[12] My general conclusion is that the Bedriacum episode is an important repository of Tacitus' political, military, metahistorical, and ethical convictions.

THE SHIFTING GROUND OF BEDRIACUM

Focusing on the battlefields of *Histories* 4, Ellen O'Gorman (1995, 117) has shown that Tacitus uses these landscapes "as physical manifestations of the moral/political/poetical discourse(s) of civil war." Likewise, the importance of Bedriacum in *Histories* 1–3 cannot be overstated.[13] As the theater of the two major battles in 69 C.E., that of Otho's forces against Vitellius' (2.41–44), and then Vitellius' against Vespasian's (3.15.1–29.2), it is a suitable narrative location for reflections on the vicissitudes of imperial power.

Tacitus introduces Bedriacum as a notable and ominous site (*duabus iam Romanis cladibus notus infaustusque,* 2.23.2), a notion he reinforces through the soldiers who fight there, some twice. The Vitellians assert that they can defeat their Othonian-turned-Flavian enemies, since they have done it once before (*isdem illis campis fuderint straverintque,* 3.13.2). Similarly, the reformed Flavians are bent on destroying the nearby Cremona, as the setting of their previous defeat by the Vitellians (*eademque rursus belli sedes,* 3.32.2). Throughout *Histories* 1–3, Tacitus focuses on the landscape of Bedriacum not as a mere background for the action, but as integral to the victories and defeats of the respective parties. The strong intratextual links that he establishes among the various trials and tribulations of this battlefield throw into sharp relief its viewing by Vitellius and his entourage. It is therefore necessary, before we turn to the Vitellians' sightseeing, to follow the vicissitudes of Bedriacum in Tacitus' own narrative of the two battles.

The historian's first survey of the grounds comes in his narrative of the battle between the Othonians and the Vitellians (2.41–44). Tacitus con-

10. For the Greek and Roman historians' claims of autopsy and inquiry as guides to the truth, see Marincola 1997, 63–86.

11. For the Roman notion of history as a didactic process see Woodman 1988, 97; 1995, 111–26 (= 1998, 86–103); Chaplin 2000; Kraus 1994, 13–14; Oakley 1997, 114–17; Henderson 1998, 301–19; Moles 1993, 141–68; Feeney 1994, 139–46.

12. For discussion on Roman "literary historiography," see the pioneering works of Wiseman (1979) and Woodman (1988). The first book-length application of this notion to the *Histories* is Ash 1999.

13. For basic discussions on the elusive location of Bedriacum, at the juncture of the roads from Cremona, Verona, and Mantua, see Wellesley 1972, 200–201; Chilver 1979, 231; Heubner 1968, 242.

stantly spotlights the vegetation, uneven terrain, and irrigation works of the area as decisive factors in the Vitellian victory. For example, the grapevines and the trees supporting them (*arboribus ac vineis,* 2.42.2) are particularly important to the Vitellians' psychological élan. The Vitellian legions assemble in an orderly way before the battle signal, since the thick tree line prevents them from being disturbed by the sight of their enemies (*aspectus armorum densis arbustis prohibebatur,* 2.41.2). This initial advantage is important, because Tacitus contrasts the Vitellian order (*sine trepidatione,* 2.41.2; *integris ordinibus,* 2.42.2) to the Othonian panic (*pavidi,* 2.41.3; *terrore,* 2.42.1; *dispersi,* 2.42.2) as critical reasons for their respective victory and defeat. Tacitus claims that the rough terrain presents both sides with equal challenges, but suggests that the physical fatigue, defective leadership, and sapped morale of the Othonians render them more vulnerable to the landscape (2.41.3; 2.42.2). Topographical remarks appear in Plutarch too, yet the elaboration of these details and their integration into the battle narrative are Tacitus' own.[14]

Another feature that Tacitus alone highlights as detrimental to the Othonians is the bodies of those fallen during the battle. The piles of dead block the field and the adjacent roads (*obstructae strage corporum viae,* 2.44.1), foiling an orderly and safe retreat for the defeated Othonians. Ironically, the dead become a working part of the landscape as a physical impediment, playing their own macabre role in the Othonian defeat. Tacitus' treatment of this element as "operational" comes into relief upon comparison with Plutarch's *Otho*.[15] The biographer also mentions the piles of the dead, but only as a curious and unresolved anecdote. Tacitus, on the other hand, integrates this detail into the overall scheme of Othonian panic, disorder, and subsequent defeat. Just as the presence of the trees benefits the Vitellians and harms the Othonians at the outset of the battle, the presence of the dead apparently adds to the Othonian casualties at its denouement.

This attention to the landscape as contributing to the Othonian vulnerability is balanced by a focus on those highlights of the actual combat that exemplify Vitellian strategic weaknesses. Tacitus includes an interesting episode at the outset of the battle (2.41.2), which recurs significantly in his later narrative. There, the Vitellian cavalry impetuously attacks the Othonians before the official battle signal, but they are met with a surprise. Having been routed by a smaller Othonian cavalry, the Vitellians are prevented from fleeing only by their own legionaries, who threaten to run them through unless they resume the fight.[16] Tacitus formally marks the unexpected Othonian bravery with the exclamation *mirum dictu* (2.41.2).

14. Cf. Plut. *Otho* 12.2: πολλοὺς δὲ τὰ χωρία διασπασμοὺς ἐποίει τάφρων ὄντα μεστὰ καὶ ὀρυγμάτων, ἃ φοβούμενοι καὶ περιϊόντες ἠναγκάζοντο φύρδην καὶ κατὰ μέρη πολλὰ συμπλέκεσθαι τοῖς ἐναντίοις.

15. Cf. Plut. *Otho* 14.2: ἐμοὶ δὲ ὕστερον ὁδεύοντι διὰ τοῦ πεδίου Μέστριος Φλῶρος, [. . .] ἐπιδείξας διηγεῖτο μετὰ τὴν μάχην ἐπελθὼν ἰδεῖν νεκρῶν σωρὸν τηλικοῦτον ὥστε τοὺς ἐπιπολῆς ἅπτεσθαι τῶν ἀετῶν. καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἔφη ζητῶν οὔτε αὐτὸς εὑρεῖν οὔτε παρ' ἄλλου του πυθέσθαι. θνήσκειν μὲν γὰρ παρὰ τοὺς ἐμφυλίους πολέμους, ὅταν τροπὴ γένηται, πλείονας εἰκός ἐστι, τῷ μηδένα ζωγρεῖν, χρῆσθαι γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι τοῖς ἁλισκομένοις, ἡ δ' ἐπὶ τοσοῦτο σωρεία καὶ συμφόρησις οὐκ ἔχει τὴν αἰτίαν εὐσυλλόγιστον.

16. On this important incident, recalled later by Antonius Primus for hortatory purposes (3.2.4), see my discussion below.

A second Othonian achievement is the brief confrontation between the Othonian novice legion I Adiutrix and the weary veterans of the XXI Rapax (2.43.1). Despite their experience in battle, the Vitellian veterans momentarily lose their standards to the Othonian rookies.[17] After their defeat, the Othonians console themselves by recalling both of these minor victories (*ne Vitellianis quidem incruentam fuisse victoriam, pulso equite, rapta legionis aquila,* 2.44.3). Tacitus acknowledges and develops these Othonian successes, both within the story, focalizing through the soldiers, and on the narrative level, through his own authorial comments.[18]

In the narrative of the second battle, Tacitus clearly evokes elements of the first, such as the details of the landscape and the tactical maneuvers. The repetition invites the reader to contemplate the shifting fortunes of the Vitellians, as they transform from winners into losers. The Flavian general Antonius Primus exploits the same ground to the optimal advantage of his troops (3.21.2), just as the Vitellian generals had done previously. The Flavian legions are positioned strategically at an embankment in a nearby road (*viae Postumiae aggere*), on flat terrain (*patenti campo*), behind a local drainage ditch (*agresti fossa*), or among the vine trellises (*densis arbustis intersaepta*). Primus' use of this last feature evokes its equally clever use as a screen by the Vitellian generals in the first battle (*densis arbustis prohibebatur,* 2.41.2). Tacitus contrasts the order of the two enemies in terms that parallel his previous narrative. The disoriented and leaderless Vitellians (*indigus rectoris, inops consilii . . . agminis disiecti,* 3.22.1–2) now resemble the previously vulnerable Othonians (*dispersi pauciores fessi,* 2.42.2). The Flavians, on the other hand, now have the dense ranks (*densis ordinibus,* 3.17.2) that the Vitellians enjoyed in the first battle (*integris ordinibus,* 2.42.2). Clearly, the Flavians adopt the Vitellian technique of exploiting the physical environment.

Tacitus similarly elaborates on the tactical maneuvers of the two sides. A particularly interesting aspect of the second battle is the focus on the Flavian cavalry. Primus highlights it as the mainstay of the campaign (3.2.4), and recalls the successful cavalry rout of the Vitellians, an episode that Tacitus has already narrated (2.41.2). Primus obviously exaggerates this minor victory to boost the morale of his reformed Othonian soldiers, many of whom remember it well (2.44.3). Yet his abundant praise proves more than a rhetorical pyrotechnic. The subsequent narrative confirms the increasingly important role of the cavalry in Primus' operations. Bedriacum and its vicinity is selected as a battlefield suitable for equestrian battles (3.8.1), a clever choice since the Flavians establish their advantage through a successful cavalry skirmish (3.16–18). The landscape contributes to their success in that episode (*iuvit locus,* 3.17.1).

17. Plutarch (*Otho* 12.3–4) also reports this episode, which suggests that it was hardly an obscure incident in the battle.

18. I use the term "focalization" as discussed in Genette 1980, 189–94. Genette explains focalization as "focus of narration," equivalent to the traditional definition "point of view" (189). For application of this concept to the *Histories,* see Ash 1999, 10, 13, 14, 27–28, 65, 74, 86.

The discussion above suggests that Tacitus visualizes the site of Bedriacum with specific interpretative aims. His integration of the landscape into the action indicates his awareness that military success depends largely on physical surroundings or natural forces. While they cannot be controlled or eliminated, such elements can be constructively channeled by charismatic and observant leaders to their strategic advantage. Having obtained some sense of Tacitus' own picture of the site, we can now turn to that of the Vitellians.

LOOKING AND SEEING

Tacitus opens the curtain at Bedriacum with Vitellius' ardent desire to survey the grounds (*lustrare. . . . concupivit,* 2.70.1), preparing us to look on through the avid eyes of the emperor himself. Instead, the historian preempts Vitellius' gaze by inviting us to see the area focalized, as it were, through his own eyes (*foedum . . . fecere*). Just as he pictures it clearly in the heat of battle (2.41–44), Tacitus now registers the decay of the aftermath.[19] Going beyond description, he denounces the disturbing sight, and, by implication, the war that has produced it in the first place. This criticism is effected through emotive and distinct language. The authorial gaze rests on the vegetation, the ground, and the dead, already familiar components of the Vitellian victory. The descriptive adjectives applied to these features (*foedum, atrox, inhumana, dira*) do not have visual qualities; they illustrate the ethics rather than the landscape of Bedriacum. The adjective *foedum* is an especially good example of this fusion between the visual and the censorious, suggesting simultaneously the biological and religious contamination caused by the unburied dead.[20] The reference to the Cremonese complements Tacitus' condemnation of civil-war mores. Beginning as pictorial commentary on their lavish celebrations, it turns into an example of corruption and poetic retribution (*laeta in praesens mox perniciem ipsis fecere,* 2.70.1). The sack of Cremona by the vengeful Flavians (3.32.1; 3.33) is foreshadowed here as a consequence of these celebrations for Vitellius' victory.

Tacitus' solemn gaze and critical tone on Bedriacum as a theater of atrocity is interrupted by the focalized narratives of Vitellius' generals, Caecina and Valens, and of their entourage (*aderant . . . miscebant,* 2.70.2). These higher officers, acting as tour guides for Vitellius, reenact for him the various operations and formations of the battle. Their speeches describe the same battlefield that Tacitus has already depicted editorially, yet the aspect and tone of this free indirect discourse is markedly different from that of Tacitus.[21]

19. On the timeline of the battle and Vitellius' subsequent visit to Bedriacum, see Chilver 1979, 231.

20. On the Romans' scruples about proper disposal of the dead, see Toynbee 1971, 39–61 (and esp. 48–49). On the double meaning of *foedus* as visually unpleasant and ethically repulsive, see *OLD* (1) "offensive to the senses, foul, loathsome . . . hideous, ugly," and (3) "repugnant to the refined taste or civilized feeling . . . horrible, atrocious, beastly, shocking."

21. On the distinction between Free Indirect Discourse (FID) and the conventional Indirect Discourse (ID), see Laird 1999, 97: "[FID statements] are not hinged grammatically on a verb of saying and thinking. They are quite independent and show a change of voice: the narrator does not have indisputable control. . . ."

Caecina and Valens reenact the development of the battle with a series of deictic adverbs (*hinc . . . hinc . . . inde*), presumably accompanied by demonstrative gestures. Their abridged narratives activate three stages of the operations, all of which Tacitus has already related. The initial attack of the Vitellian infantry is summarized in a gesture toward their starting point (*hinc inrupisse legionum agmen*). The vagueness of *hinc,* however, obscures the beneficial role of the thick tree line in the Vitellian preparations for battle (2.41.2). Furthermore, the reference to the Vitellian cavalry (*hinc equites coortos*) omits the important detail that it was routed by a smaller Othonian force (2.41.2). The tension between the generals' glorifying rhetoric and Tacitus' less heroic version of these two achievements is dramatized by the spectacle of the torn trees (*protritis arboribus*) and putrefying horses (*putres . . . equorumque formae*), whose role in this episode is silenced by Caecina and Valens. These elements remain unexplained, protecting Vitellius from the more uncomfortable details of his victory. Tacitus alone refers to the decay of the landscape as comparable to that of the unburied casualties, obviously stressing its importance as similar to that of the human element.

Furthermore, the generals' description of legionary maneuvers under the collective *legionum agmen* amalgamates all the legions in one victorious entity and obscures isolated defeats, such as the loss of the standards of XXI Rapax (2.43.1). This omission, combined with the rushed account of the cavalry episode, effectively glosses over two potentially troublesome Vitellian vulnerabilities. The part about the Othonians being outflanked by Vitellian auxiliaries (*circumfusas auxiliorum manus*) is closer to Tacitus' own narrative, but not entirely unproblematic, since Caecina and Valens leave out the numerical superiority of the Vitellians (*circumventi plurium adcursu quartadecimani,* 2.43.2).[22]

Other significant omissions include the role of the uneven and heavily planted terrain, as well as the cadavers that rendered the Othonians easy targets during their retreat. The spectacle of the dead (*trunci artus*) and of the polluted grounds (*infecta tabo humus*) conjures for us their presence in the heat of combat, but its importance naturally evades the uninformed Vitellius. The tortured landscape, bearing clearly the marks of its contribution to the Vitellian victory, functions for the Vitellian generals merely as a stimulant to their memory and a theatrical setting for their own achievements. The tribunes of the legions and prefects of the auxiliaries, eager to emulate Caecina's and Valens' self-glorifying rhetoric, complement the narratives of their generals with their own commentaries. Tacitus' statement that these are largely products of fabrication or exaggeration (*falsa vera aut maiora vero*, 2.70.3) is not just a rhetorical point. The historian suggests a considerable rift between the authentic Bedriacum of vision, which he himself has described both at the moment of battle and in its aftermath, and the perceived Bedriacum of rhetoric.

22. This episode is narrated from a different perspective at 2.43.2 and 2.70.2 (Chilver 1979, 207). Tacitus, on the other hand, consistently stresses the Othonian's numerical inferiority in both cavalry and infantry (*a paucioribus Othonianis,* 2.41.2; *pauciores,* 2.42.2). Conversely, the Vitellians are stronger and more numerous (*robore et numero praestantior,* 2.42.2).

Tacitus' own visual and moral perception of the scene, which constitutes the genuine and authoritative reading of Bedriacum, contrasts sharply with the self-centered outlook of these characters. Their highly edited account, offered for Vitellius' consumption, constitutes both a tactical and an ethical mistake. Their battle reconstruction misrepresents the Vitellian victory as relatively unproblematic, obscuring its less glorious aspects. The potential weaknesses of the cavalry and the infantry, as well as the felicitous role of the landscape itself, are conveniently silenced. The account is also morally flawed, because the cheerful and glorifying rhetoric of these officers completely and purposefully filters out the human cost of their victory.[23]

Yet Tacitus is not alone in focusing on the pathos of Bedriacum. The officers' indifference to its moral content is a foil for the intense engagement of the soldiers, which ranges from speechless joy and relief to reflection and compassion (*volgus . . . subiret,* 2.70.3). The various emotional and ethical developments among the soldiers are precipitated by their physical approach to the site, and by their understanding of the landscape in Tacitus' own terms. As they abandon the main road (*deflectere via*) and enter the battlefield, their spatial regression triggers an emotional one. While their initial joy (*gaudio*) and simple exclamations (*clamore*) evoke the cheerful demeanor of their commanders, their mood changes as soon as they absorb the reality before them. Their minimal speech is replaced by the gradual intensity of their gaze. As they fall silent, the soldiers open their eyes to the real Bedriacum of Tacitus' vision. The asyndeton *recognoscere . . . intueri . . . mirari,* with its escalating verbs, conveys the gradual absorption of their experience. First, they merely recognize (*recognoscere*) the familiar grounds, but then they stare (*intueri*), and finally gape (*mirari*) at the arms and bodies lying therein.[24] Simultaneously, the respective objects of *recognoscere, intueri,* and *mirari* span, in reverse chronological order, the glorified past to the dreadful present. At first, the soldiers visualize the field (*spatia certaminum*), naturally in the heat of combat. The trophy (*aggerem armorum*), made of arms stripped from the defeated, transports the soldiers' gaze from the moment of battle to its immediate aftermath.[25] Finally, their eyes bring them back to the present, as they become overwhelmed by the sight of the dead (*strues corporum*). At this narrative moment, their gaze finally synchronizes and identifies with that of Tacitus, who has first seen the *lacera corpora* (2.70.1).[26] Their somber mood contrasts with their previous frivolity, and is even further from the cheerful barbarism of their officers.

While all of the soldiers progress through these stages of visual development and are indiscriminately overcome by what Gwyn Morgan identifies

23. For a similar objectification and glorification of the dead by spectators of a battle aftermath, see Stat. *Theb.* 3.117–19 and 12.38–43 with Lovatt 1999, 129–33.

24. For *cognoscere* as a verb of both physical and cognitive perception, see *OLD* (6) "to have experience of," and (7) "to discern, detect, see." Germanicus' sight-seeing trip in Egypt is described in the same terms: *M. Silano L. Norbano consulibus Germanicus Aegyptum proficiscitur cognoscendae antiquitatis* (*Ann.* 2.59.1).

25. Both Chilver (1979, 231) and Heubner (1968, 243–44) interpret *aggerem armorum* as a trophy, and provide parallel usages in Tacitus and other authors.

26. For a similar time-space collapse and the soldiers' spatial and emotional regression at Teutoburg, see Pagán 1999, 307–9.

as "simple feelings," a smaller group (*erant quos*) strongly internalizes the message of the site (*varia sors . . . subiret,* 2.70.3).[27] Tacitus' stratification does not discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate ethical reactions, but provides realistic nuances of emotional intelligence within a large group.[28] For these few soldiers, Bedriacum emerges as a monument to the futility of human affairs. This minority group becomes important as a mirror on which Tacitus projects his own reflections on the war.

The poignancy of this scene as a commentary on the evils of civil strife is accentuated by its rich intratextual and intertextual background.[29] The language describing the soldiers' ruminations implies that the object of their contemplation is more specific than the human lot (*sortem rerum*); it is the particular trauma of civil war. Their musings on human fate evoke their sentiments right after the battle of Bedriacum, recounted earlier in the narrative. There, Vitellians fraternize with their Othonian enemies, and denounce their fortunes in unison (2.45.3):

> tum victi victoresque in lacrimas effusi, sortem civilium armorum misera laetitia detestantes; isdem tentoriis alii fratrum, alii propinquorum volnera fovebant: spes et praemia in ambiguo, certa funera et luctus, nec quisquam adeo mali expers, ut non aliquam mortem maereret. requisitum Orfidii legati corpus honore solito crematur; paucos necessarii ipsorum sepelivere, ceterum volgus super humum relictum.
>
> Then, victors and defeated broke into tears, cursing with miserable joy the fate of civil war; in the same tents some nursed the wounds of brothers, others, of relatives. Their hopes and rewards were doubtful; only death and lamentation were certain, since no one was such a stranger to the disaster that he did not mourn some loss. They searched for the body of the commander, Orfidius, and burned it with the appropriate honors. A few were buried by their own relatives, but most remained lying on the ground.

In this passage, the soldiers' collective denouncement of civil wars (*sortem civilium armorum*) results from realizing their own mortality. Human frailty dawns upon them at the sight of their injured and dead comrades. The same dead, lying unburied forty days later, evoke similar thoughts on the *sortem civilium armorum* (2.45.3) and the *sortem rerum* (2.70.3).[30] This intratextual link, connecting the immediate and later aftermaths of Bedriacum, promotes a sympathetic impression of the soldiers on both sides. This movement back in time reaches beyond the story told in the *Histories*. Tacitus'

27. Morgan (1992, 20) briefly notices this stratification of emotion among the various spectators: ". . . from the rational lecture by the generals, through the mixture of reason and emotion which animates the junior officers, to the simple feelings of the soldiery."

28. Morgan (1992, 21) rightly argues that this stratification is not aimed as criticism of the rest of the soldiers. Tacitus is especially sensitive to divergences, various motivations, and ethical developments within large groups, but, naturally enough, his stratifications do not always signal disparagement. For a discussion of stratification within military bodies in the *Histories,* see Ash 1999, 23–72, and esp. 51–52, 70–72.

29. By "intratextuality" I mean the structural relationship of this passage to others within the *Histories;* by "intertextuality" I signify Tacitus' dialogue with other authors, in both prose and poetry. For a review of the theoretical issues surrounding intertextuality and the author's "intentions," see Laird 1999, 34–40.

30. On the similar sentiments of the soldiers in the aftermath of Teutoburg, cf. *Ann.*1.61.1: *igitur cupido Caesarem invadit solvendi suprema militibus ducique, permoto ad miserationem omni qui aderat exercitu ob propinquos, amicos, denique ob casus bellorum et sortem hominum.*

portrayal of the somber Vitellians gestures to an older narrative of civil war, Sallust's *Catiline* (61.8–9):

> multi autem, qui e castris visundi aut spoliandi gratia processerant, volventes hostilia cadavera amicum alii, pars hospitem aut cognatum reperiebant; fuere item qui inimicos suos cognoscerent. ita varie per omnem exercitum laetitia, maeror, luctus atque gaudia agitabantur.
>
> Many, too, who had come from the camp to see or to pillage, on turning over the bodies of the rebels found here a friend, there a guest or a relative. There were some who recognized their own enemies. Thus the whole army was affected with joy, grief, lamentation, and elation.

In the final lines of his monograph, Sallust surveys the aftermath of Catiline's defeat and death at Pistoria.[31] Here, the various and conflicted feelings of the civil war participants (*laetitia, maeror, luctus atque gaudia*) recall the schadenfreude of Othonians and Vitellians (*misera laetitia,* 2.45.3).[32] This emotional limbo is understandable in the context of a civil war, which creates an unnatural distinction between friend and foe.[33] By alluding to Sallust, Tacitus suggests that the social and ethical dilemmas of civil wars have not changed much between 63 B.C.E. and 69 C.E. This thought fits well with the Roman notion of domestic strife as an inescapable national fate.[34] By nodding to this famous aftermath, Tacitus embraces Sallust's take on civil war as a "somber anticlimax of desperation and futility . . . a useless and murderous battle."[35]

The Sallustian overtone of the portrait of the soldiers as regretful civil war participants is complemented by Vergilian echoes.[36] Their viewing of the devastation and their intense emotional reaction recall one of the most famous *ekphraseis* of war before Tacitus (*Aen.* 1.456–62):

> miratur, videt Iliacas ex ordine pugnas
> bellaque iam fama totum vulgata per orbem,
> Atridas Priamumque et saevum ambobus Achillem.
> constitit et lacrimans "quis iam locus" inquit "Achate,
> quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?
> en Priamus. sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi,
> sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt."
>
> He stares, he looks on the Trojan battles depicted in order, and the war known around the world through rumor, the sons of Atreus, Priam, and Achilles, an enemy to both. He

31. On Sallust's account of these final events in Catiline's career, see *Cat.* 56–61 with McGushin 1977, 277–89; Ramsey 1984, 224–39.

32. On the soldiers' confusion in Sallust, see Ramsey (1984, 234), who differentiates between their "outward expression of these emotions" and "the inner feeling." Note also Tacitus' *recognoscere* (2.70.3) and Sallust's *cognoscerent*.

33. On Roman sensitivities regarding the social and ethical paradoxes of civil war, see Bannon 1997; Roller 2001, 17–63; Hardie 1993, 57–71.

34. The notion of civil war as part of Roman destiny, beginning with Romulus' fratricide, is well founded in the Republican tradition, and is later fostered by Livy and Horace. For an overview of relevant authors, see Green 1994, 203–4.

35. For this comment on *Cat.* 61.8–9, see Syme 1958, 68.

36. For an exhaustive list of Vergilian parallels for 2.70 see Funari 1989, 584–94. Vergil's influence on Tacitus has long been established. For an overview see Henry 1991, 2987–3005.

> stands and says, in tears, "Achates, what place, what region in the whole earth is not full of our struggles? Look: Priam! Here too virtue has its due rewards; there are tears for misfortune, and mortal sorrows touch the heart."

The context here is well known: moved by the murals at the temple of Juno in Carthage, Aeneas tearfully ponders human empathy.[37] His distress at the sight of the Trojan battlefield is aligned with the soldiers' sorrow at Bedriacum. Aeneas' intense viewing (*miratur,* 456) parallels that of the Vitellians (*mirantur,* 2.70.3), while his tearful reaction and reference to tears (*lacrimans,* 459; *lacrimae rerum,* 462) resembles the Vitellians' pondering *sortem rerum lacrimaeque*.

Just as Aeneas sees the casualties on both the Greek and the Roman side, the Vitellian group is moved indiscriminately by the sight of all the dead, friends and foes that lie unidentifiable and undifferentiated before their eyes. This assimilation between Othonian and Vitellian dead is reiterated elsewhere in the narrative. Tacitus tells us that the two enemies fought at Bedriacum in close quarters, knowing each other well (*noscentes inter se,* 2.42.2), and later refers to them as civilian citizens.[38] The *civium legiones* (2.38.2) fighting at Bedriacum turn fatefully into *milia insepultorum civium* (2.70.4) after the battle. The image of assimilated enemies is a standard element of civil-war discourse, spanning Republican and imperial authors of different genres.[39] Tacitus' integration of the two sides here underlines their common vulnerability to the violence of war.[40]

Furthermore, the allusion to the Vergilian *lacrimae rerum* holds historiographical and literary implications. This distinctive collocation occurs only twice in the extant literature, its uniqueness suggesting a deeper connection between Vergil and Tacitus.[41] Aeneas' praise of the anonymous painters (*artificumque manus,* 1.455) implies his hopes that the Carthaginians will be sympathetic to his plight. To him, their artistic reconstruction of the war is evidence of their humanity. Yet the real painter behind the deft *artificum manus,* is, of course, Vergil, whose *ekphraseis* have long been identified as self-referential statements of his poetics.[42]

37. For a comparison between Aeneas' melancholy in this scene, as opposed to Caesar's joy at Pharsalus (Luc. 7.787–96), see Lovatt 1999, 130–33. For a comparison between Caesar at Pharsalus and Vitellius at Bedriacum, see my discussion below.

38. Readers disagree over Tacitus' intentions in *noscentes inter se.* The two main alternative interpretations postulate that (1) the two sides were familiar with each other in general/personal terms, and (2) they were lined up so close that they could clearly look into each other's faces. Chilver (1979, 207) refutes the first interpretation and argues that "all Tacitus means is that both sides knew to which side the other troops belong." Heubner (1968, 162) supports the second view, arguing that, because of their physical proximity to each other, those in the first ranks "einander erkennen sie physiognomisch genau."

39. Cf. Cic. *Cat.* 4.11: *cerno animo sepulta in patria miseros atque insepultos acervos civium.* Tacitus consistently delineates distinctive portraits for the various armies in the *Histories* (Ash 1999, 23–72), so his occasional assimilation of the enemies for dramatic effect does not compromise his general distinctions.

40. For a different interpretation of the soldiers' viewing, see Haynes 2003, 83–84. Haynes argues that the Vergilian allusion neutralizes any emotional impact the battlefield might have on any of its spectators, since it transforms Bedriacum into a work of art: "The soldiers who feel pity for what they interpret as the vagaries of fortune nevertheless, like their leader, in the very act of looking, transform the scene into the neutrality of an image" (84–85).

41. On the "mysterious universality" of these Vergilian lines, and relevant literature, see Austin 1971, 156–57.

42. For the *ekphraseis* in the *Aeneid* as metaphors for Vergil's own artistic progress, see Putnam 1998.

Much like Vergil, Tacitus translates the speechless image of Bedriacum into words. He conveys its emotional impact on the onlookers and unites his internal and external audiences in a common viewing of war suffering. Servius' comment on the fictional Carthaginian painters (1.461) captures the humanitarian spirit of all artists who choose war as their subject matter: *qui enim bella depingunt, et virtutem diligunt, et miseratione tanguntur.*[43] Just as *qui* leaves open the type of artist meant, *depingere* applies equally to the fine arts and literature.[44] That Tacitus would use an epic *ekphrasis* to fuel his vision of Bedriacum should not surprise us, given the Roman notion of history as a *carmen solutum* (Quint. *Inst*. 10.27–36).[45] By connecting to Vergil through *lacrimae rerum,* Tacitus asserts his literary right to replace an autopsy of the "real" Bedriacum of 69 C.E. with a product of his own historical imagination. In this, Tacitus is following an established tradition connecting literature with the plastic arts.[46] As a comment on artistic empathy, *lacrimae rerum* dramatizes Tacitus' views on his authorial responsibilities, and his notion that historical and artistic integrity are not mutually exclusive concepts.

By providing insight into the Vitellians' character, Tacitus furthers his collective presentation of the military in the *Histories*. As Rhiannon Ash has argued, Tacitus reacts to the parallel tradition about 69 C.E., according to which the soldiers rebel under the influence of irrational and inscrutable forces.[47] The soldiers in the *Histories* are more thoughtful than has often been assumed, and the Vitellians, especially, gain the moral high ground as the narrative progresses.[48] Tacitus' interest in a rational and penetrating study of these soldiers is evident in the fact that he includes them in his narrative, while Suetonius and Dio do not. The soldiers' viewing of the battlefield in the *Histories* casts them less as self-motivated mercenaries, and more as hirelings executing the orders of war, at the mercy of leaders and political forces larger than they.

43. The full passage reads as follows: *omnis Aeneae sollicitudo de moribus Afrorum est, quam nunc picturae contemplatione deponit. qui enim bella depingunt, et virtutem diligunt, et miseratione tanguntur.* See also Williams 1972, 196 ad loc.: "It is understood that the meaning is 'people are sympathetic,' not 'the world is full of sorrows, is a vale of tears.'"

44. For *depingere* as a verb of both visual and literary representation, see *OLD* (4) "to describe, represent (in words or imagination)." Cf. *formam . . . verbis depinxit* (Plaut. *Poen*. 1114); *quae cogitatione depingimus* (Cic. *Luc*. 48, *Nat. D.* 1.39); *tripertito illo in sermone depinxit* (Cic. *De or.* 2.51); *tota verum imago quodammodo verbis depingitur* (Quint. *Inst*. 8.3.63); *verba ex historia Claudi Quadrigari, quibus . . . pugnam depinxit* (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

45. On the interaction between Roman epic and historiography, and examples of this fusion in Augustan literature, see Levene and Nelis 2002, and esp. the chapters by Pagán, discussing the connections between Vergil's Actium and Tacitus' Teutoburg (45–59), and by Ash, discussing battle narratives in historical and epic traditions (253–73).

46. Cf. Horace's famous declaration *ut pictura poesis* (*Ars P.* 361). For the relevant tradition from Simonides to Quintilian, see Brink 1971, 368–71, and Rudd 1989, 209. Against the potential objection that this concept concerns poetry rather than prose, we should keep in mind the interaction between historiography and epic.

47. For a discussion of madness language in Plutarch, as opposed to Tacitus' rational description, see Ash 1997, 189–214 (and esp. 189–96); 1999, 23–29. The issue of the "common source" of Tac. *Hist.* 1–3, Plut. *Galb., Otho,* and Suet. *Galb., Otho,* and *Vit.*, has been exhaustively discussed. For a recent overview see Damon 2003, 22–30.

48. Certainly the Vitellians do not begin in this vein. Ash (1999, 37–55) illustrates that their portrait does not remain static, but evolves throughout the *Histories.*

At Bedriacum, the officers' glorifying rhetoric substitutes for the raw visual truth of war. Speech becomes a filter between the faculties of vision and perception, through which the obvious cruelty of civil discord is frivolously sublimated as military glory.[49] But while politicians like Vitellius' entourage reinvent this atrocity with their rhetoric, the soldiers, having experienced and now reliving the trauma of combat, do not share this mindless enthusiasm. Regardless of the gradations in emotional intensity, the soldiers grasp better the content of Bedriacum. Tacitus' moralistic commentary here is in line with the Roman concept that the mission of history was to provide an education in ethics.[50] The heightened sensitivity of Roman audiences to civil war dictated that historians made it their civic and literary duty to touch that raw nerve.

VITELLIUS' BLINDNESS

So far, I have suggested that not all viewers see the same things at the battlefield. Their highly variant perceptions are dependent upon their status, proximity (physical and social) to the emperor, and actual combat experience. Having looked at how various military men experience Bedriacum through speech and vision, it is now appropriate to turn to Vitellius, since he alone is the intended viewer of the spectacle. To date, discussions of the emperor's maliciousness have not considered its implications within the context of the other spectators at the site. Yet the presence of this entourage in Tacitus, notable by its absence in the parallel narratives, does not license such a unilateral approach. A comparison of the accounts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio reveals that the Tacitean Vitellius is less callous toward the dead than previously assumed.[51] Instead of cruel, Vitellius emerges more as a distracted spectator, impervious to both the factual details of the battle and the ethical implications of his victory. This double blindness enables Tacitus to explicate Vitellius' subsequent failing fortunes. In what follows, I first establish Tacitus' portrayal of Vitellius as a passive viewer, mainly through intertextual links to other battle aftermaths. Then, by following the intratextual network of this episode in *Histories* 3, I connect Vitellius' flawed gaze at Bedriacum to his failed efforts against the Flavians.

Tacitus' subtle treatment of Vitellius comes into sharp relief when compared with the alternative accounts of this episode in the narratives of Suetonius and Dio. Although different at times, both of these accounts favor the sensational and anecdotal details of Vitellius' private life over the political dimensions of this episode. Suetonius' narrative is famous for what Morgan aptly calls the "smell of victory" (*Vit.* 10.3):

49. For the same "heroic reconstruction" of a battle aftermath in Stat. *Theb.* (3.117–19), see Lovatt 1999, 131. In discussing the Thebans who come out to observe those slain by Tydeus, she observes: "The bodies are the proof of Tydeus' status as a hero, and the audience seem to be an epic audience, full of desire to examine the deeds of heroes and to validate their heroism with the bodies of those whom they killed."

50. On the other hand, Morgan (1992, 21) notices briefly, and dismisses, this angle of the Bedriacum episode: "With the moral we need not concern ourselves again."

51. On Tacitus' reaction to the hostile literary tradition about Vitellius (but without reference to this episode), see Ash 1999, 96–118.

utque campos, in quibus pugnatum est, adiit, abhorrentis quosdam cadaverum tabem detestabili voce confirmare ausus est, optime olere occisum hostem et melius civem. nec eo setius ad leniendam gravitatem odoris plurimum meri propalam hausit passimque divisit. pari vanitate atque insolentia lapidem memoriae Othonis inscriptum intuens dignum eo Mausoleo ait, pugionemque, quo is se occiderat, in Agrippinensem coloniam misit Marti dedicandum. in Appennini quidem iugis etiam pervigilium egit.

When he came to the plains where the battle was fought and some were horrified by the rot of the corpses, he dared encourage them by a detestable saying, that the odor of a dead enemy was sweet and that of a Roman citizen even better. Still, in order to assuage the awful stench, he publicly downed a great amount of unmixed wine and distributed some to his attendants. With equal vanity and arrogance, gazing upon the stone inscribed to the memory of Otho, he said that he deserved such a Mausoleum, and sent the dagger with which Otho had killed himself to the colony of Agrippina, to be dedicated to Mars. He also held a nightly festival on the heights of the Apennines.

Suetonius, in a "vastly more robust" account than that of Tacitus, provides a distasteful portrait of Vitellius.[52] His insensitive comment about the smell of decomposition and Otho's tomb is matched only by his intoxication and subsequent celebratory *pervigilium*.[53] The biographer openly criticizes this conduct as vanity and arrogance (*vanitate ac insolentia*). Dio is less graphic, but equally determined in his condemnation of Vitellius (65.1.3):

ὅτι ὁ Οὐιτέλλιος εἶδεν ἐν Λουγδούνῳ μονομάχων ἀγῶνας καὶ ἐν Κρεμῶνι, ὥσπερ οὐκ ἀρκοῦντος τοῦ πλήθους τῶν ἐν ταῖς μάχαις ἀπολωλότων καὶ τότε καὶ ἔτι ἀτάφων ἐρριμμένων, ὡς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐθεάσατο· διεξῆλθε γὰρ διὰ παντὸς τοῦ χωρίου ἐν ᾧ ἔκειντο, ἐμπιμπλάμενος τῆς θέας ὥσπερ τότε νικῶν, καὶ οὐκ ἐκέλευσέ σφας οὐδ' ὡς ταφῆναι.

Vitellius viewed gladiatorial combats at Lugdunum and again at Cremona, as if the crowds of men who had died in the battles and were even then lying unburied had not been enough. He saw the dead with his own eyes, for he traversed all the ground where they lay and filled his eyes with the spectacle as if it were still the moment of his victory; and not even then did he order them to be buried.

The thrust of Dio's criticism lies essentially in the association of gladiatorial spectacle with the spectacle at Bedriacum, both of which Vitellius enjoys with gusto. Despite the thematic differences between these two narratives, an important common denominator is that Vitellius looks at, and reacts directly to, the dead. In Suetonius' account he enjoys the stench of decomposition, while in Dio's he revels in the sight of it. Verbs of vision appear in both accounts (*intuens,* εἶδεν, ἐθεάσατο, ἐμπιμπλάμενος τῆς θέας), expressing Vitellius' visual engagement and enjoyment. On the other hand, his (mis)conduct in the *Histories* is infinitely more subtle.

The intricacy of Vitellius' treatment manifests itself at the very beginning of the Tacitean episode. The obvious connection between Caecina's

52. See Morgan (1992, 27–29) for both quotations, and for a more detailed analysis of Suetonius' narrative. Morgan accounts for Tacitus' omission of Vitellius' comment in terms of the propriety of historiography, which excludes reference to scents.

53. On *pervigilium,* cf. 2.68.1: *apud Vitellium omnia indisposita temulenta, pervigiliis ac bacchanalibus quam disciplinae et castris propiora.* The criticism implied in *pervigilium* is obvious. The word appears once more in the Tacitean corpus, to describe all-female propitiatory festivals to Juno (*Ann.* 15.44.1). On such private flaws set in the context of Vitellius' leadership, see Ash 1999, 95–125, and esp. 112–18.

gladiatorial spectacle and Bedriacum is structural rather than explicitly verbal, and thus quite restrained. Vitellius appears less interested in the dead and more in the site itself, an impression that Tacitus effects by his narrative structure and diction. First, he deflects the focus from Vitellius to other viewers by including, and elaborating on, their various reactions. Vitellius' only contact with the dead is marginalized at the end of the passage (2.70.4); contrast the narratives of Suetonius and Dio, who make imperial vindictiveness the centerpiece of their narratives. Moreover, Tacitus associates Vitellius with the vocabulary of topography rather than of spectacle. The emperor wishes to visit the *Bedriacenses campi* (2.70.1) and survey generally the traces, or evidence (*vestigia,* 2.70.1), of his victory.[54] He is the audience of a narrative that describes the *pugnae locos* (2.70.3), and finally sacrifices to the *dis loci* (2.70.4).[55] Above all, Vitellius never looks, actively or avidly, at the bodies. Tacitus says that he was not appalled enough to avert his gaze, thus stating what he did not do, rather than what he actually did (*non flexit . . . oculos, non exhorruit*). The man is depicted as unbelievably callous, but he never appears to crave, or delight in, the gruesome spectacle.

Vitellius' passive and selective viewing emerges more clearly in comparison with a more famous civil war general, Lucan's Caesar in *Bellum civile* (7.787–95):[56]

> postquam clara dies Pharsalica damna retexit,
> nulla loci facies revocat feralibus arvis
> haerentes oculos. cernit propulsa cruore
> flumina et excelsos cumulis aequantia colles
> corpora, sidentis in tabem spectat acervos
> et Magni numerat populos, epulisque paratur
> ille locus, vultus ex quo facies iacentum
> agnoscat. iuvat Emathiam non cernere terram
> et lustrare oculis campos sub clade latentes.
>
> When daylight revealed the casualties of Pharsalia, no facet of the land turned his eyes away, fixed as they were on the fatal battlefield. He sees rivers fast with gore, and heaps of corpses like high hills; he looks on the piles of dead beginning to rot, and counts Pompey's numerous followers. And a spot is prepared for his feasting, from which he can recognize the faces and features of the dead. It pleases him that he cannot see the soil of Emathia, and that the plain that his eyes survey is hidden by carnage.

The morning after his victory at Pharsalus, Caesar happily rests his gaze on the numerous casualties, and gives orders for breakfast to be prepared on

54. On *vestigium* see *OLD* (1) "a footprint, track, left by a human being or other creatures" (b) "a line or track (left by any other moving object)" (c) *vestigium facere:* "to set foot (in a place, emphasizing one's physical presence)." Note, however, an alternative meaning: (d) "a track indicating the scent of an animal." Through *vestigia,* Tacitus could be alluding to the anecdote about Vitellius sniffing (animal-like) the stench of decomposition. On Vitellius' animalistic qualities, cf. 3.36.1: *umbraculis hortorum abditus, ut ignava animalia, quibus si cibum suggeras, iacent torpentque*.

55. Chilver (1979, 231) also notes that *sacrum dis loci* softens Vitellius' portrait: "one may suspect that Vitellius' visit to Cremona, which ended with a *sacrum* to the local divinities, was intended as an act of piety rather than sadism."

56. Heubner (1968, 242) cites Luc. 7.794 (*lustrare oculis*) as a parallel to Tacitus. Pagán (2000, 430–31) compares Lucan's Caesar to Livy's Hannibal (22.51.5–6), who is portrayed as a bloodthirsty tyrant after the Roman defeat at Cannae.

location. The obvious circumstantial similarity between Caesar and Vitellius, as civil-war victors gazing upon battle aftermaths, is highlighted by instructive verbal echoes. Vitellius' nerve in the *Histories* (*at non . . . exhorruit,* 2.70.4) recalls Lucan's statement about Caesar not averting his eyes from the dead (*nulla . . . oculos,* 787–89). Other parallels (*tabem,* 791~*tabo,* 2.70.1; *corpora,* 791~*corpora,* 2.70.1; *lustrare oculis,* 795~*lustrare oculis,* 2.70.1) add to the comparable tenor of both passages. However, a closer look shows that these similarities act as a foil for the more important differences between the two men. Lucan focalizes through Caesar's conscious gaze and enjoyment of the spectacle, in a series of affirmative verbs and statements about his visual activity (*haerentes oculos, cernit, spectat, numerat, agnoscat, iuvat . . . non cernere . . . lustrare*).[57] Tacitus' account lacks both the abundance and the tone of such verbs, a treatment undermining the impression of Vitellius' voyeurism. Lucan's unpalatable detail about Caesar preparing a feast, reminiscent of Suetonius' half-drunk Vitellius, is entirely absent from Tacitus, together with the severe moral criticism implied in such a comment.

Tacitus places his Lucanian loans into an entirely different context, thus making his Vitellius distinct from Caesar. Two examples of this creative transformation speak to the point. Tacitus recounts Vitellius' desire to look at the field (*lustrare oculis,* 2.70.1), which clearly echoes Lucan's *lustrare oculis* (795). Yet Tacitus' claim is not the same as Lucan's. His point is that Vitellius desired (*concupivit*) to survey the grounds before his arrival on location, not that he actively enjoyed the aftermath, as Caesar did.[58] The object of Vitellius' intended gaze is the modest and rather abstract *vestigia recentis victoriae,* which hardly alludes to decomposing bodies. Contrast Lucan's determined *iuvat . . . lustrare oculis campos sub clade iacentes* (794–95), describing Caesar's active and pleasured gaze. In the same vein, Lucan's *agnoscat* (794) recalls Tacitus' *recognoscere* (2.70.3), yet the context again provides decisive markers for distinguishing between the two. Tacitus applies *recognoscere* to the soldiers' visual and moral awakening to the battlefield, and, by implication, to the horrors of civil wars. Lucan uses *agnoscat* for Caesar, stressing his cognizant perception and approval of what he sees.[59]

While Lucan's Caesar happily enjoys the macabre spectacle, Tacitus' Vitellius seems essentially oblivious to it. As he becomes enthralled by the

57. For a discussion of Caesar at Pharsalus, with particular emphasis on these verbs of vision, see Lovatt 1999, 130–35. On spectacle in Lucan, see Leigh 1997, and, esp. on Caesar, 77–109 and 292–306. On the mangled and dehumanized body as a symbol of civil war in Lucan, see Bartsch 1997, 10–47.

58. Indeed, the parallels that Heubner (1968, 242) cites on Tacitus' *lustrare oculis* (*lustravi oculis totam urbem,* Petron. *Sat.* 11.1; *lustrat ovans oculis et gaudet origine regni,* Sil. *Pun.* 2.405; *hic primum lustrare oculis cultusque virorum,* Stat. *Theb.* 1.482) describe active and focused sight-seeing, not a desire to see. On Tacitus' *concupivit* (2.70.1) cf. the beginning of his Teutoburg narrative, where a similar desire, not reprehensible by any means, seizes Germanicus: *igitur cupido Caesarem invadit solvendi suprema militibus ducique* (*Ann.* 1.61.1).

59. On Lucan's *agnoscat* in this context, Lovatt (1999, 131) observes: "Lucan underlines the disturbing nature of his [Caesar's] gaze by juxtaposing the dehumanization with his desire to recognize the individual dead: *agnosco* is a verb of personal recognition. These scientifically observed corpses belong to people whom Caesar knew personally, and knew well."

glorious action reconstructed in the officers' commentary, his visual consciousness is numbed by the alluring rhetoric of his interlocutors. Thus, Vitellius stands opposite to the soldiers, whose ethical awakening is prompted by visualizing and reliving their combat experience.[60] Tacitus marks this contrast of moods by comparing the respective conclusions of Vitellius and the soldiers. Having seen the dead, a few of them are moved by the *sortem rerum* (2.70.3). Vitellius, who has *looked* but not *seen,* remains *sortis ignarus* (2.70.4). Visual ignorance of the battlefield becomes cognitive ignorance of his political and personal fate.[61] The difference that Elizabeth Keitel identifies between "the humanity of the soldiers and the cruelty of the emperor"[62] can be seen as Tacitus' subtle distinction between varying degrees of visual awareness.

The intertextual comparisons with Suetonius, Dio, and Lucan indicate Tacitus' knowledge of both a specific tradition denigrating Vitellius and a general aftermath *topos* used as a shorthand for criticizing a victor's brutality. By subtly manipulating this literary background, the historian portrays a distinct Vitellius. Insensitive and unsympathetic as he may be, he is certainly not the human monster that one conditioned by these sensational narratives of gore might expect. Tacitus' deft handling of his sources is summarized in his interesting choice of the word *vestigia* (2.70.1), which can be seen as a metapoetical comment on his composition of this episode. On the story level, *vestigia* denotes the general "evidence" of combat and the nondescript object of Vitellius' gaze. Yet *vestigium,* when applied in a context regarding literature, also signifies a trace to follow and emulate, a literary precedent. Thus, for example, Statius' famous prayer addressed to his epic: *nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora* (*Theb.* 12.816–17). With less modesty, but in a similar vein, Horace professes the Roman dramatists' independence from Greek models: *vestigia Graeca / ausi deserere et celebrare domestica facta* (*Ars P.* 286–87).[63] In his choice of the meaningful *vestigia,* Tacitus suggests that, as a literary artist, he is consciously and confidently treading the beaten track of battle aftermaths. His critical following of literary *vestigia* allows him to voice his unique interpretation of Vitellius' character, the soldiers' concerns during the Long Year, and his views on the circular inevitability of Rome's civil wars. However, his treatment of these literary *vestigia* is wholly his own, and results in a distinct picture of Bedriacum. For example, by using the literary tropes

60. Although his analysis is completely different from mine, Morgan (1992, 29) arrives at a similar conclusion: "[Tacitus'] aim was not to disgust the audience with specific details about the emperor's conduct . . . rather he was seeking to bring out the horrors of the scene as a whole, playing Vitellius off against the other participants."

61. Tacitus insists elsewhere on Vitellius' ignorance of divine laws and religious practices. Cf. *adeo omnis humani divinique iuris expers* (2.91.1) with Scott 1968, 93–94. See also Ash 1999, 134, contrasting Vitellius' indifference to omens to Vespasian's and Titus' regard for them.

62. Keitel 1992, 343.

63. Cf. similar examples: *Zenonis eum vestigiis hoc modo rationem poteris concludere* (Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.23); *ex eo, qui . . . sit consilio linguaequae princeps, cuius vestigia persequi cupiunt, eius sententiam sciscitantur* (Cic. *De or.* 1.105); *Antoni, non aberrat oratio tua, sive tu similitudine illius divini ingeni in eadem incurris vestigia* (ibid. 2.152); *ceterum, ut de Homero taceam, in quo nullius non artis aut opera perfecta aut certe non dubia vestigia reperiuntur* (Quint. *Inst.* 12.11.21).

of Sallust and Vergil, Tacitus imports into his account certain reflections about civil war that are absent from the largely scabrous and anecdotal accounts of Suetonius and Dio. Lucan is put to similar use; by comparison to Caesar, Vitellius emerges less as a tyrant and more as an impressionable audience completely susceptible to the powerful rhetoric of his subordinates.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Vitellius' visual and cognitive ignorance, as it emerges at Bedriacum, is not simply a matter of characterization. The episode encodes the *princeps'* flawed gaze as a symbol of his wishful thinking, selective memory, and increasing reliance on others, all features that contribute to his political and personal downfall. Vitellius' dependency on positive informants is a concept that Tacitus first establishes here, by focusing on Caecina and Valens as arbiters of the emperor's gaze.[64] His visit at Bedriacum is framed by the viewing of two gladiatorial spectacles, one provided by Caecina (*spectato munere Caecinae,* 2.70.1), the other by Valens (*a Fabio Valente gladiatorum spectaculum,* 2.71.1). Readers have repeatedly stressed this framing as suggestive of Vitellius' voyeuristic cruelty, but have not noted that his gaze is manipulated by these two generals before, during, and after the Bedriacum episode. Once in Rome, Caecina and Valens continue to distract the emperor with spectacles (*munia imperii Caecina ac Valens obibant,* 2.92.1), all while Vespasian is preparing his own bid for the empire (2.74–2.87.1). Vitellius' false sense of security in his imperial status, established by Caecina's and Valens' highly selective accounts of Bedriacum, is fostered by the accounts of lesser officials. These scouts, significantly mentioned by Tacitus as *speculatores* (2.73), perform their own autopsy of the political climate in Syria and Judaea. Their outlook replaces and satisfies Vitellius' own understanding of his influence in the Eastern provinces (2.73). Vitellius' ignorance at Bedriacum (*ignarus,* 2.70.4) also becomes a staple of his imperial career and a hindrance in his efforts against the Flavian invasion of Italy. He is ignorant of military affairs, including field maneuvers and scouting (*ignarus militiae . . . quis ordo agminis . . . quae cura explorandi,* 3.56.2), and has to ask others for information (*alios rogitans,* 3.56.2). His reliance on the experienced Valens (*nec militiae ignarus,* 3.15.1) proves the wrong choice when the general is executed (3.62).[65]

Vitellius' ignorance of military affairs enables Caecina and Valens to provide him with a drastically emended version of the battle at Bedriacum. It would not be unreasonable to assume that Vitellius' sense of success prompts him to stay in Rome, dismissing the second Bedriacum as a successful encore of the first battle. Tacitus suggests the positive potential of Vitellius' presence among his soldiers, by stressing their steadfast loyalty to him before, and their leaderless state during, the second battle (3.12–13;

64. Tacitus prepares us for their influence on Vitellius long before his imperial career (1.52.3). For their role in the Vitellian uprising see Ash 1999, 108–11.

65. This ignorance is not only military but political as well. Soon after Vespasian's proclamation in Syria, Vitellius loses a potential ally, King Agrippa II, who escapes Rome *ignaro adhuc Vitellio* (2.81.1).

3.31.1).[66] There was no reason for the Vitellians to lose there, other than the lack of leaders who would again take advantage of the physical surroundings. On the other hand, Primus, also experienced in military topography, exploits the landscape to the optimal advantage of his troops. Vitellius' ignorance of the pragmatics of battle prevents him from realizing, and guarding against, the fact that the first victory was the result of a felicitous alliance between human and natural elements. His acquiescent reliance on the reports of others is largely responsible for the disastrous results in the second Bedriacum.

Vitellius' flawed vision costs him the second Bedriacum, but, even then, Tacitus tells us that all is not lost (3.54.1). Still, as Vitellius lingers in Rome, he misses one opportunity after another to rectify this defeat. His misdirected gaze comes into sharp focus in two episodes, uniquely developed in the *Histories*. In the first of these (3.38–39), Vitellius arranges for the poisoning of an alleged rival, Junius Blaesus, after the *princeps'* brother, Lucius Vitellius, accuses Blaesus of imperial aspirations (3.38.3–4). The most interesting aspect of this episode is Tacitus' concluding comment on the emperor's visual satisfaction (3.39.1):

> quin et audita est saevissima Vitellii vox, qua se (ipsa enim verba referam) pavisse oculos spectata inimici morte iactavit.
>
> Moreover, Vitellius was heard to brag most ruthlessly (and I am quoting his exact words) that he had feasted his eyes on the spectacle of his enemy's death.

Vitellius' claim about feasting his eyes must have been part of the tradition, as is suggested by its inclusion in Suetonius' *Vitellius*. There, the emperor orders the death of one of his debtors, both for profit and to "feast his eyes" (*pascere oculos,* 14.2). However, while Suetonius recounts this anecdote briefly among others to criticize Vitellius' cruelty, Tacitus develops it with richer implications. This is the first instance in which Vitellius views with self-awareness, a notion that Tacitus drives home with his atypically forceful affirmation that he is quoting the emperor verbatim. Vitellius' self-possessed *mot* about feasting his eyes ironically concludes an incident elaborating his manipulation by his inner circle.[67]

Vitellius' anonymous advisers are credited with (in)sight into potential causes of imperial offense, their sycophantic talent expressed appropriately in terms of vision (*principum offensas acriter speculantur,* 3.38.2). Lucius invites Vitellius to disregard the distant dangers posed by Vespasian, and to concentrate on Blaesus' imminent threat (3.38.3).[68] Lucius' manipulation

66. On the lower ranking soldiers' loyalty to Vitellius see Ash 1999, 51–52. In terms of leadership, Vitellius contrasts sharply with his rival, Otho, who develops a close relationship with his soldiers (Ash 1999, 83–94).

67. Tacitus pursues this issue elsewhere: *et amici adulantes mollius interpretabantur* (2.96.1); *arcuere eos intimi amicorum Vitellii, ita formatis principis auribus, ut aspere quae utilia, nec quidquam nisi iucundum et laesurum acciperet* (3.56.3). On the identity of these friends, see Wellesley 1972, 206.

68. The full passage reads as follows: *frustra Vespasianum timeri, quem tot Germanicae legiones, tot provinciae virtute ac fide, tantum denique terrarum ac maris immensis spatiis arceat: in urbe ac sinu cavendum hostem Iunios Antoniosque avos iactantem, qui se stirpe imperatoria comem ac magnificum militibus ostentet* (3.38.3).

of his brother consists in his blatant omission of the defeat at the second Bedriacum, but mainly in his substitution of Primus' vicinity for Vespasian's remoteness. The emperor is invited to visualize the lands and seas that separate him from Vespasian (*terrarum ac maris immensis spatiis,* 3.38.3), and then zoom in on Rome and his own household (*in urbe ac sinu,* 3.38.3) as the immediate target of Blaesus' threat. Once we realize that the plot relies mainly on a careful monitoring and a clever manipulation of Vitellius' gaze, his own comment about feasting his eyes acquires significant irony. The emperor knowingly channels his authority and energy into an insignificant and misdirected cause, and thereby avoids, consciously or unconsciously, having to deal with the unpleasant realities posed by his defeat at Bedriacum.

Vitellius' faulty vision returns in another episode, the suicide of the centurion Julius Agrestis (3.54). Soon after his defeat at Bedriacum, Vitellius plunges into deep denial (*laeta omnia fingeret, falsis ingravescebat,* 3.54.1). His carefully edited version of reality includes the secret execution of his own scouts (*exploratores,* 3.54.2), who have surveyed, and testify to, the strength of the Flavian forces. When Julius Agrestis fails to exhort Vitellius to action, he asks permission for a reconnaissance of the Flavian camp to learn firsthand the truth about what happened (*ad vires hostium spectandas quaeque apud Cremonam acta forent,* 3.54.2). Having asked Primus to see everything (*ut cuncta viseret postulat,* 3.54.2), Agrestis receives guides who lead him over the remnants of the battle (*missi qui locum proelii, Cremonae vestigia, captas legiones ostenderent,* 3.54.2). Just as Vitellius before him, Agrestis surveys the *vestigia* of Bedriacum, but, as a military man, he understands better the significance of what he sees. When Vitellius refuses to believe Agrestis' disheartening testimony, the centurion gives credence to his speech by committing suicide (3.54.3). Persuaded at last, Vitellius springs into action (3.55.1).

Tacitus develops this episode similarly to his narrative of Junius Blaesus, to stress Vitellius' wishful denial of informative autopsy and his gravitation towards pleasant, but ultimately destructive, fictions. The story of the loyal soldier committing suicide to convince his emperor of the awful truth appears in Suetonius and Dio—but in relation to Otho, not Vitellius.[69] In these accounts, a scout returns to report the Othonian defeat at the first Bedriacum, but he is met with the disbelief of his comrades. By committing suicide before Otho, the anonymous soldier provides ultimate evidence of his credibility. Tacitus' crucial divergence lies in his choice of Vitellius as the single intended audience of this bad news. The historian suggests that, despite the presence of sound individuals around him (like Blaesus or Agrestis), Vitellius' political decisions are dictated by his self-imposed denial. Once he has seen Agrestis die before his eyes, the emperor finally springs into action, as

69. Cf. Suetonius (*Otho* 10.1): *qui cum cladem exercitus nuntiaret nec cuiquam fidem faceret ac nunc mendaci nunc timoris, quasi fugisset, ex acie argueretur, gladio ante pedes eius incubuerit;* and Dio Cass. (64.11): ἤγγειλε μὲν ἱππεύς τις τὸ πάθος τῷ Ὄθωνι· καὶ ἐπειδή γε ἠπιστεῖτο πρὸς τῶν παρόντων (ἔτυχον γὰρ πολλοὶ κατὰ τύχην ἠθροισμένοι) καὶ οἱ μὲν δραπέτην οἱ δὲ καὶ πολέμιον αὐτὸν ἀπεκάλουν [. . .] καὶ ὁ μὲν ταῦτ' εἰπὼν ἑαυτὸν διεχρήσατο· πιστευσάντων δ' αὐτῷ ἐκ τούτου πάντων . . .

if from sleep (*ut e somno excitus,* 3.55.1). This image is particularly appropriate. Sleep suggests a blindness or otherwise deceptive vision, a notion fitting with Vitellius' tenuous grasp on his surroundings. Once Vitellius has decided to take action, Tacitus concedes that it is still not too late to turn the tables on the Flavians, but only under a different leader (*si dux alius foret,* 3.55.1). This statement takes us back to the *princeps'* ignorance of military affairs, and prompts us to retrace the course from self-imposed blindness to ever more leadership failures.

The intricacy that Tacitus weaves between Vitellius' flawed gaze and his failed politics is resolved at the moment of his public execution. Tacitus punctuates this episode with the emperor's final gaze on the rostra and Galba's dying place (*contueri,* 3.85). Keitel notes that in Suetonius' *Vitellius,* the dying emperor is forced to look up, not to see, but to be seen. She argues that "[Tacitus'] slight change underscores powerfully Vitellius' *peripeteia* and one of its causes,"[70] suggesting, I believe, Vitellius' self-indulgent desire for entertaining spectacles. This important point can be contextualized within Tacitus' climactically constructed presentation of Vitellius' relation to spectacle. Lulled to a false sense of security at Bedriacum by the powerful rhetoric of Caecina, Valens, and his other subordinates, he continues to focus his gaze on minutiae, missing the larger picture of Antonius' invasion. Finally roused to action, he accomplishes too little too late, gaining true clarity and some dignity only at the moment of his death. His stoic reply to an insulting tribune, "once I was your emperor" (3.85), is a self-referential comment on the vicissitudes of imperial power and his own lost potential, wasted amidst self-deluding diversions. Tacitus' generous comment that Vitellius' last word was *una vox non degeneris animi* (3.85), is an implicit acknowledgement of the emperor's journey through the pitfalls of rhetoric and flawed vision to a lucid, humane, but ultimately vain self-realization.

Thus, Tacitus effects a distinct treatment of Vitellius, through strong intertextual and intratextual connections. The intertextual connections underline Vitellius' passivity and ineffective leadership, while the intratextual ones explicate his defeat in terms of both this passivity and his destructive dependence on the (real or metaphorical) visions of others. The Bedriacum episode codifies the resilient elements of Vitellius' personality, which are not the cruelty and gluttony traditionally associated with him. Instead, Vitellius is characterized and eventually destroyed by his dependence on external information, conveyed to him by agents whom he considers better purveyors of the truth than himself.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bedriacum episode is instrumental within the *Histories,* since Tacitus deploys it as a means of reflecting on individual and collective characterization, political and military strategies, and artistic and historical integrity. The episode stands at the center of an intricate intratextual and intertextual

70. Keitel 1992, 350.

web, and the mutually beneficial cross-pollination of these various texts expands our understanding and appreciation of Tacitus' insights.

At the same time, the high literary quality of this episode emphasizes the dangers of language itself. At Bedriacum, Tacitus presents speech as a potentially hazardous means of experiencing the world, treacherously mediating between empirical understanding and rationalization. Yet this valid and persuasive argument within the story potentially undermines the authority of Tacitus' own narrative and interpretation. The historian never claims for himself an autopsy of Bedriacum, yet he envisions and portrays it as a symbol of war cruelty, vanity, and self-imposed ignorance. This he does by exploiting the intricate rhetoric of the aftermath *topos*. Even as he exposes the fallacious artistry of political rhetoric, he himself reconstructs, through rhetoric, the "real" image that he never saw. This seeming inconsistency speaks to the heart of his historical discourse. How can we reconcile such ostensibly incongruous treatments of speech and vision?

Living in a culture where orality (mainly oratory, hearsay, and public readings) was the main medium for dispersing information, Tacitus must have been especially sensitive to the reliability of vision and autopsy as a means of reconstructing the past.[71] Nevertheless, he claims a pictorial and ethical fidelity to the spectacle, and promotes his own historical discourse as a genuine, dependable, and therefore didactic reconstruction of reality. Whether or not we agree with his interpretation, we cannot but engage meaningfully with it. Tacitus' intratextual and intertextual pursuit of sight, woven throughout this episode, provides insights absent from the parallel versions. The accounts of Suetonius and Dio are perhaps more sensational and memorable, but their (intra- and inter-) textual isolation renders them less discerning narratives in political, military, social, artistic, and ethical terms.

By providing us with his own authorial guidance for touring Bedriacum, Tacitus essentially argues that rhetoric per se is not fallacious if used properly and responsibly to educate its audiences. To bemoan the fallacy of speech without providing an alternative to it would be to despair of ever knowing and understanding the world beyond our immediate senses. Yet this view is fundamentally alien to Tacitus, who is famous for constantly seducing us with his confident and powerful convictions. As every Tacitus devotee knows well, "to this day it requires great discipline to resist his interpretation of events."[72] At Bedriacum, Tacitus knows well that he sees the true picture, and his words are exactly worth the picture he sees.[73]

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71. Tacitus' interest in autopsy traces back to the *Dialogus* (*haec non auditu cognoscenda, sed oculis spectanda,* 8.2). Mayer (2001, 110) comments ad loc. that this statement subscribes to the "proverbial reliance upon sight rather than hearsay for solid evidence." On this popular *topos,* see Otto 1890, 1272.

72. Damon 2003, vii.

73. A short version of this paper was read at a graduate conference at Harvard University (March 2002), where I first got encouraging and inspired suggestions. My warmest thanks to Shadi Bartsch, the anonymous reviewers at *CP,* and my friends Antony Augoustakis and Lily Panoussi for their discerning eye and constructive criticism.

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