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PREFACE

This volume examines various aspects of contemporary historiography in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The term ‘contemporary historiography’ (Jacoby’s *Zeitgeschichte*) is usually applied to historical works that cover, in whole or in part, the periods of time through which the historians themselves lived. These works are typically valued for their proximity to the events they narrate, though they are not without their problems of interpretation. Through various devices, authors might attempt to give the impression of eyewitness status even when they themselves were not present; contemporary events could shift authors’ point of view and compel them to provide unrealistic or biased accounts; and memories of eyewitnesses were not always sharp. The papers in this volume examine how we might read and understand histories of this type. They demonstrate how contemporary historiography was practiced across time and how it was a constantly evolving part of the Greco-Roman historiographic tradition.

The papers on Herodotus and Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Cassius Dio, and Herodian originated in a session held at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in San Diego in 2019. To the original four papers presented there have been added chapters on Ptolemy I Soter, Sallust, and Tacitus.

My thanks go to the contributors to this supplement, for their dedication and persistence, and to John Marincola, for his help and patience in bringing this work to publication. I also thank the anonymous reviewers, who offered many criticisms and suggestions for the improvement of this volume as a whole.

A.G.S.
Philadelphia, November 2022

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SALLUST AND THE ‘MODERN’ LIE*

Jennifer Gerrish

Abstract: Sallust’s *Histories* confront the ‘modern’ organised political lie and demonstrate that historical truth can only be preserved by those outside the political sphere. The speech of the historian and tribune Licinius Macer demonstrates the post-Sullan apathy towards truth. As a historian Macer might be an independent critic, but as a politician he cannot overcome the corrosive effects of organised lying. Macer’s failure reinforces Sallust’s assertion that his own removal from politics is key to wresting the truth from the triumvirs. If the historian’s role is that of truth-teller, the ideal historian is not only removed from public life but also uses history to respond to contemporary events and concerns.

Keywords: Sallust, Roman historiography, contemporary history, triumviral history, Licinius Macer

The difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.¹

At nineteen years old, I raised an army at my own initiative and expense; with it I restored freedom to the republic, which had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction.²

I. Sallust’s Defactualised World and the ‘Modern’ Lie

When I began drafting this chapter, I was holed up in central North Carolina, having complied with the governor’s mandatory evacuation order as Hurricane Dorian threatened to barrel into Charleston, South Carolina. The national news coverage of the storm took

*I would like to thank the anonymous *Histos* referees for their insights and feedback on this piece, as well as Andrew Scott for his tireless efforts to bring this volume to fruition despite the disruption of a global pandemic. For Sallust’s *Histories* I have followed the numeration and text of Ramsey’s Loeb edition (2015). All translations of all texts are my own.

¹ Arendt (1968) 253.

² *RGDA* 1.

a bizarre twist when, in a tweet, then-U.S. President Donald Trump incorrectly listed Alabama among the states facing potential impacts of the storm. In order to prevent panic, the National Weather Service (NWS) office in Birmingham, Alabama immediately issued a correction. A surreal dialogue ensued: late-night hosts and the Twittersphere made light of Trump's error and a defensive Trump doubled down by producing a week-old forecast map that had been doctored with a Sharpie marker to include Alabama in the 'cone of probability'. This was soon followed by an unsigned—but official—statement from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) rebuking the Birmingham NWS and upholding Trump's claim. The *New York Times* reported that Mick Mulvaney, the acting White House chief of staff, had instructed Wilbur Ross, the commerce secretary, to pressure NOAA to issue a defence of the president; the *Times* further reported that Ross had warned NOAA officials that the agency's failure to comply could result in terminations.³ The manifest flimsiness of NOAA's defence of Trump's error and the fact that it was produced under threat of firing hardly mattered. It bore the sanction of the (theoretically apolitical) agency and thus became part of the 'official' historical record; future historians of 21st-century America will have to weigh its credibility against whatever else of the record remains.⁴

Watching this unfold, I wondered what Sallust would have thought of it all. I suspect that he would be unsurprised. It has become a commonplace to describe the contemporary climate as one of post-truthfulness, as though this is a novel condition, as though we have only just now suddenly stumbled

³ Baker–Friedman–Lavelle (2019).

⁴ Although it felt consequential at the time, this example seems almost quaint from the perspective of today. I've opted to leave this introduction in place because, in my opinion, the Hurricane Dorian example illustrates the creeping insidiousness of the modern lie in a way that is even more visible in hindsight. In the case of Hurricane Dorian, Trump was soothing his wounded ego; the only intended outcome was to avoid seeming like a 'loser', one of his preoccupations. But this example is just one of many I could have chosen, and even seemingly inconsequential lies have a cumulatively numbing effect when they are deployed insistently enough; and so, by the end of 2020, the Trumpian base, nourished on a steady diet of small lies that reinforced their world-view (e.g., affirming Trump's infallibility), was well-prepared to embrace the big lie of the 'stolen' election. The ultimate consequences of this lie for American democracy are not yet known, but they will surely be far greater than a falsified weather map; the speed with which the lies escalated from absurd and face-saving (Dorian) to deadly (the January 6, 2021 insurrection) is chilling.

off the well-worn path of truth into an inscrutable forest of public deception.⁵ In fact, concerns that have become inescapable parts of daily life in the United States (and, really, the globe)—rising totalitarianism, violent cultural divisions, organised lying, and the increasing irrelevance of facts—are not altogether different from the issues that plagued Sallust’s triumviral world. The historiography of the *Histories* is constructed at the intersection of concomitant concerns: it struggled to bear witness to the trauma of the civil wars while those wars were ongoing and while, at the same time, the very history of those wars was being threatened with erasure by an authoritarian regime. Much like our own, Sallust’s world was threatened with becoming ‘defactualised’ as traditional paradigms of truth and authority were disrupted by aspirant autocrats who used multiple media to drown out or paper over inconvenient truths.

The political theorist Hannah Arendt drew a distinction between the so-called ‘traditional’ lie and the ‘modern’ lie, the latter of which she described as ‘... the *relatively recent* phenomenon of mass manipulation of fact and opinion as it has become evident in the rewriting of history, in image-making, and in actual government policy’.⁶ Whereas the traditional lie concealed secrets or the truth, the modern political lie sought to destroy and replace:

The traditional political lie, so prominent in the history of diplomacy and statecraft, used to concern either true secrets—data that had never been made public—or intentions, which anyhow do not possess the same degree of reliability as established facts. ... In contrast, the modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody. This is obvious in the case of rewriting contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it, but it is equally true in image-making of all sorts, in which, again, every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to hurt the image; for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it.⁷

⁵ A quick library database search yields dozens of examples spanning the last twenty years, though the heaviest concentration seems to be post-2016.

⁶ Arendt (1968) 252; emphasis mine.

⁷ Arendt (1968) 252.

The traditional and modern lies were also different in scope and target insofar as ‘the traditional lie concerned only particulars and was never meant to deceive literally everybody; it was directed at the enemy and meant to deceive only him’.⁸ The modern lie thus aimed to rewrite history and replace it with its own version, not just effacing but annihilating the truth entirely, and in doing so to manipulate one’s own people in ways once reserved for the enemy. The 21st century has seen this unfold on both the small scale (the hurricane map example cited above) and the global (the myth of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ deployed as a pretext for the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States).⁹

The features of the ‘modern’ political lie described by Arendt do not seem to me ‘relatively recent’ at all; in fact, stripped of context, many of Arendt’s descriptions of the ‘modern lie’ could be applied to Rome’s triumviral period with great plausibility.¹⁰ The falsehoods promulgated by the triumvirs to justify the creation and renewal of that hideous pact are well-known: the triumvirs were going to devote themselves to punishing the Liberators, ending the civil wars, and setting the state to rights;¹¹ the Perusine War was nothing but a bunch of bumpkins stirred up by Fulvia’s machinations, and Sextus Pompey was a pirate; and (though Sallust himself did not live to see this peak of propagandistic achievement) Mark Antony was the depraved slave of Cleopatra, the *fatale monstrum* against whose Egyptian empire a necessary and just war was waged.¹² By the time it was all immortalised in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, competing narratives and facts had been discredited and delegitimised to such an extent that Augustus could simply replace them all with a sanitised ‘official’ version.

While the preceding is, admittedly, a simplified and schematic representation of the breakdown of ‘truth’ in the triumviral years, I would

⁸ Arendt (1968) 253.

⁹ To this must now be added the Republican lies about election fraud in 2020.

¹⁰ Arendt’s work often engaged with the ancient world with great thoughtfulness and subtlety, and I doubt she meant us to understand in a literal sense that these tactics had never been employed before her day; the ‘novelty’ she emphasised seems to be in the scale and thoroughness in lying committed by twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, facilitated in large part by the development of modern technology and modes of communication.

¹¹ On the ‘triumviral assignment’, see Lange (2009) 18–26. To be fair, the triumvirs followed through on the first of these promises.

¹² The bibliography on the creation of the Augustan myth is vast. Syme (1939) is still worth considering; one might also begin with Gurval (1995), Osgood (2006), or Lange (2009).

argue that Sallust grappled with some of the same questions as Arendt did.¹³ How are we to understand the role of ‘truth’ when not just individual bad actors, but entire political cultures routinely and systematically deny history? And what is the role of the historian in such a defactualised world? Arendt identified the historian, along with the poet and the novelist, as a potential ‘truthteller’ whose position outside of politics allowed for a certain transcendence of self-interest.¹⁴ Sallust had had a political career (quaestor in 55 BCE, tribune in 52), but had been removed from the senate rolls twice; expelled by the censors in 50 in partisan revenge for his actions as tribune in 52, he was soon reinstated (perhaps through Caesar’s influence) only to forfeit his seat in 46 when faced with charges of extortion as governor of Africa. This time, his departure from public life was permanent. Perhaps Sallust did not leave politics of his own volition, but (if we take the preface of the *Catiline* at least semi-seriously) he found a silver lining: now armed with both his political experience and some critical distance, he could write history with a mind and spirit free from interest and partisanship.¹⁵ The *Histories*, composed well into Sallust’s retirement (or ‘retirement’), thus offered him an opportunity to make the case for the non-partisan reporter’s value as a witness and defender of historical truth.¹⁶

In what follows, I will argue that Sallust’s *Histories* demonstrate that the idea of the ‘modern’ lie is nothing modern at all, but a long-lived technique of autocracy. I would also like to suggest that the criticism that the ‘modern’ lie is not new is *also* not new, and that Sallust engages with this idea in the *Histories*. In this respect, while the *Histories* are ‘about’ the 70s, they are also very much contemporary, triumviral history. Sallust is not the first historian who comes to mind when we think of ‘contemporary’ or ‘eyewitness’ history. He was a youth during the period of the *Histories* and the *Jugurtha* takes place

¹³ Here I have focused particularly on the essay ‘Truth and Politics’ (1968), but Arendt raises similar themes in ‘Lying and Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers’ (1971), as well as her book *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1976).

¹⁴ Arendt (1968) 259–63.

¹⁵ *Cat.* 4.2: *mihī a spe metu partibus rei publicae animus liber erat*; cf. *Hist.* 1.6 R: *neque me divorsa pars in civilibus armis movit a vero* (‘nor did my affiliation with a different faction in the civil war sway me from the truth’).

¹⁶ It is impossible to say whether Sallust was, in fact, completely ‘objective’, however that might be measured. However, I think it is reasonable to believe that *he* believed this. In an ideal world, Sallust might not have believed retirement was the best position for a historian; however, since this was the situation in which he found himself, it was surely in his interest to convince himself that his new status was advantageous.

several generations prior; while Sallust was alive for the events of the *Catiline* he seems to have played no role, and he generally does not emphasise autopsy as a claim to historiographical authority.¹⁷ Yet all three works are undeniably concerned with themes that characterised Sallust's own day: personal ambition versus the common good, the tension between the aristocracy and the 'new men', *avaritia* and the corrupting influence of prosperity. The *Histories*, in particular, have the feel of contemporary history. The parallels between the narrative time (the 70s) and the time of composition (the 30s) were numerous and grim: political instability and violence following the death of a dictator, internal discord and external threats, disaffected veterans expecting reward, and so forth. The *Histories* are at once engaged with the past and the present, as Sallust exploited these similarities to critique the politics of his own day by analogy.¹⁸

Sallust was deeply interested in the conflicts between words and deeds and between pretence and reality, and he approaches both contemporary history and history of the 'past' through this lens. I have already gestured towards some of the larger-scale deceptions perpetrated by the triumvirs and we can imagine that small-scale deceit (more 'forged forecast map' than 'covert assassination') was a constant of public life. It is all too easy to imagine the same kind of cynicism and apathy towards the truth of which Arendt warned settling in during the triumviral years. The characters of the *Histories*, engaged in contests for legitimacy and supremacy after Sulla's death, display precisely that fatigue; 'truth/lies' and 'fact/fiction' have become unimportant categories. It isn't so much that what was true before is false now; it simply doesn't matter, as authority consists not in truth or even plausibility, but in arms. I will argue that Sallust shows us this apathy towards truth in the aftermath of Sulla's dictatorship as a cautionary tale for his contemporary audience. Born in the 80s and later to political families, the triumvirs themselves were products of a post-truth world, and they were not only comfortable operating within it but also seemed eager to exploit it. Sallust shows in the *Histories* how the indifference towards truth after Sulla

¹⁷ The fragmentary nature of Roman historiography before Sallust (even more fragmentary than the *Histories* themselves!) makes it difficult to know how typical or atypical Sallust was in this respect; see Marincola (1997) 76–7.

¹⁸ Gerrish (2019) 35–72. I should note that the *Histories* appear to have been a detailed and exciting account of the 70s and 60s, and my suggestion here that they are multivalent by no means implies that I think Sallust was uninterested in the past *qua* past; any work can have multiple purposes and interests, and the allusive interpretation presented here does not require the exclusion of others.

led to the continued de-factualisation of Roman politics, and in turn renewed civil war and the return of dictatorship. Perhaps Sallust felt that, by demonstrating to his readers that what they were experiencing was not, in fact, new and that the consequences of continuing in the status quo were both grim and predictable, as an Arendtian truth-teller he might foster among his contemporaries a more critical attitude and a willingness to confront truths, no matter how raw or unpleasant. This, in turn, may help explain why Sallust wrote the *Histories* at all, given the encroaching pessimism in his expressions of history's utility over the course of his literary career.¹⁹

II. The *Histories* as Witness to a Disappearing History

In the prologues of his first two works, the monographs on Catiline and Jugurtha, Sallust gives a brief defence of the value of writing history. One can act honourably by praising the state as well as performing good deeds in its service (*Cat.* 3.1), and indeed the lasting reputation of a city is predicated on the fame and skill of the writers who memorialise it (*Cat.* 8); furthermore, the past may be a source of inspiration and pride, provided there exists an audience capable of properly interpreting it (*Jug.* 4). The fragmentary state of the Latin historiographical tradition prior to Sallust makes it difficult to say how formulaic these claims may have been,²⁰ but there is no reason to doubt their general sincerity; after all, why write history if it has no value?

The preface of the *Histories*, on the other hand, seems to have been strangely silent on the question of the historian's purpose. I say 'seems to have been' because the *Histories* as we have them comprise some five hundred fragments that have primarily made their way to us in quotations by ancient grammarians. Modern editors have quibbled over the precise composition of the prologue, but in no iteration do we find a clear comment on the value of writing history. Perhaps the *Histories* did contain historiographical commentary that simply has not survived, but we cannot assume this; we might also suppose that Sallust was so confident in history's

¹⁹ Tiffou (1974) 311–14.

²⁰ Scanlon (1998). There are some parallels in the Greek tradition; for example, scholars have noted echoes here of Sallust's frequent model Thucydides and his creation of a *κτῆγμα ἐς ἀεί* to be used as a guide by future readers (1.22). On Sallust's use of Thucydides see Scanlon (1980).

utility that it needed no defence.²¹ I am inclined to believe that, when he wrote the *Histories*, Sallust was, in fact, still deeply interested in the purpose and utility of writing history, particularly in light of the rapidly changing world around him. The *Histories* are an allusive text on many levels, and I suggest that Sallust's historiographical reflections are consistent with that programme; rather than instruct the reader with explicit pronouncements, the *Histories* invite us to engage with questions of history's utility through characters who act as (more or less successful) meta-historians.²² So, given the difficulty of writing history in a defactualised world, why *did* Sallust take on the project? I suggest that one of his purposes was to bear witness to that very erasure of history as it was unfolding and to provide an anchor of meaning in a world in which basic categories had become unstable. The risk of the modern, organised lie is not simply that false things will be believed and true things will not, but that an apathy towards the very notion of truth will set in:

It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism—an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed.²³

Arendt's depiction of the categorical agnosticism that results from the destabilisation of the traditional understanding of 'truth' and 'lies' is similar in spirit to Thucydides' famous observations about the instability of language

²¹ Scanlon (1998) 223: 'Either the utility of history is an issue which is so self-evident that it is not discussed in the *Historiae* proem, or assertions on utility similar to those in the preface of the *Jugurtha* were made in lost passages'. It is also possible that Sallust omitted a preface because he considered the work as a continuation of Sisenna's *Histories*, as some have supposed that Sallust took their endpoint as his starting point; but the fragmentary state of both works precludes certainty or even confidence in this assertion: cf. Syme (1964) 182 and Briscoe (2013) 308.

²² Gerrish (2019) 73–105.

²³ Arendt (1968) 257.

and meaning in stasis, a passage to which Sallust returns in both the *Catiline* and the *Histories* (3.82.4):²⁴

καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιοῦσει. τόλμα μὲν γὰρ ἀλόγιστος ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος ἐνομίσθη, μέλλησις δὲ προμηθῆς δειλία εὐπρεπής, τὸ δὲ σῶφρον τοῦ ἀνάνδρου πρόσχημα, καὶ τὸ πρὸς ἅπαν ξυνετὸν ἐπὶ πᾶν ἀργόν.

And they transformed the traditional value of words in accordance with what seemed justified. For reckless audacity was considered courage on behalf of comrades, prudent forethought was considered specious cowardice, moderation a veil for spinelessness, and capacity to understand everything was considered laziness about everything.

While critics since Dionysius of Halicarnassus have quarrelled over the precise interpretation of this passage, the general consensus is that Thucydides suggests that *stasis* introduces a crisis of moral and political language as each side corrupts the meaning of value-words to justify their actions. However, as Lydia Spielberg has demonstrated, Thucydides himself is critical not just of the abuse of language but also of the ‘self-serving use of this commonplace complaint about corrupted value language’.²⁵ A sort of *aporia* is reached, in which ‘the “real motive” matters little more than the pretext in terms of the actual events that result’.²⁶ Likewise, Arendt’s ‘modern lie’ confounds the categories of true and false so thoroughly as to render those categories meaningless. The issue is not that words mean the opposite of what they once did—that ‘lies will now be accepted as truth and the truth be defamed as lies’—but rather that our ability to orient ourselves around value-categories has been utterly exhausted by systematic and pervasive deceit. Fine, then: Hurricane Dorian was forecast to hit Alabama;

²⁴ *Cat.* 38.3, 52.11; *Hist.* 1.12, 1.49.24, and 3.15.11–12 R). There is a vast bibliography on the *stasis* excursus discussing both the original Thucydidean version and its reception by later writers; see, e.g., Macleod (1979), Wilson (1982), Price (2001).

²⁵ Spielberg (2017) 333 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Spielberg (2017) 340. In addition to the Corcyra passage, Sallust no doubt also had in mind Thucydides’ interest in the interplay of *λόγος* and *ἔργον* more generally (on which see, e.g., Ober (1998) 52–121). We might also contrast Sallust’s ‘modern’ lie with Plato’s so-called ‘noble’ lie, a type of lie which even Plato’s Socrates himself admitted was something of a unicorn (*Rep.* 414c). Both are ‘top-down’ forms of public lying, but Plato’s ‘noble’ lie is part of a knowing self-deception rather than a cynical attempt to gain power.

the republic has been restored. It is easiest simply to yield to the most powerful—or loudest—faction. This, of course, is precisely the point: having delegitimised competing claims to authority and ground down any potential resistance through the forceful and tireless repetition of lies, those in power can forge ahead unchallenged.

III. The Modern Lie and its Consequences in the *Histories*

If Sallust died in 35, as tradition holds, he did not live to see the *telos* of the triumviral propaganda wars: the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. However, before his death he would have witnessed Octavian's skilful, systematic replacement of inconvenient truths with more flattering narratives that supported his self-presentation as his father's avenger and the restorer of the republic.²⁷ The crisis at Perusia highlighted the human tragedy caused by the triumvirs' programme of land confiscation, as the dispossessed and suffering landowners found champions in Lucius Antonius and his powerful sister-in-law, Mark Antony's wife Fulvia. Left in charge of Italy and thus bearing the most public culpability for the land confiscations, Octavian deflected blame by omitting the plight of the landowners from his own narrative entirely and depicted the conflict as the disastrous result of Fulvia's overweening and unseemly ambitions; the acerbic ditty attributed to Octavian by Martial gives a vivid sense of the rhetoric the triumvir employed against her.²⁸ Octavian was also forced to reckon with Sextus Pompey, who had taken up residence in Sicily, where he welcomed refugees from the proscriptions and organised a powerful fleet.²⁹ Rather than engage with Sextus as a legitimate political rival with solid republican credentials, Octavian tarred him as a

²⁷ Although all three triumvirs—and, no doubt, other prominent figures of the time—engaged in public self-fashioning and attacking their opponents, I will largely focus on Octavian here, since his narrative is the best attested (for obvious reasons).

²⁸ Mart. 11.20.3–8: *Quod futuit Glaphyran Antonius, hanc mihi poenam | Fulvia constituit, se quoque uti futuam. | Fulviam ego ut futuam? Quid si me Manius oret | pedicem, faciam? Non puto, si sapiam. | 'Aut futue, aut pugnemus' ait. Quid, quod mihi vita | carior est ipsa mentula? Signa canant!* ('Because Antonius fucks Glaphura, Fulvia has decided that this is my punishment, that I should fuck her [Fulvia] too. That I should fuck Fulvia? What if Manius were to ask that I fuck him? Should I do it? I think not, if I have any sense. "Either fuck me," she says, "or let us fight." What to do, since my dick is dearer to me than life? Sound the signal for battle!')

²⁹ See Welch (2012) for a welcome reconsideration of the conventional dismissal of Sextus' republican ambitions. That it took until the 21st century for a serious reappraisal of Sextus to be offered is a vivid illustration of the success of Octavian/Augustus' narrative.

pirate.³⁰ Like Arendt's modern lie, Octavian's revised narratives were meant to destroy the truth, not merely replace it, and they were aimed not at the enemy, but at the Roman people themselves.³¹ They were persuasive not because they were *true*, but because they were plausible *enough* and they were rehearsed loudly and repeatedly. Octavian had a coercive combination of loyal troops and minimal scruples.

The political climate of the triumviral period was not at all dissimilar to the post-Sullan decade. The years that followed Sulla's abdication and death were turbulent both at home and abroad. Sulla's reign was nothing short of a cultural trauma; the unspeakable violence of his march on the city and subsequent proscriptions left Rome and Italy in tatters both physically and psychologically.³² The domestic political scene was dominated by unscrupulous and ambitious figures who turned the widespread exhaustion and apathy towards truth to their advantage as they sought individual *dominatio* under more palatable names. In what follows, I will highlight two ways in which the *Histories*' depiction of the 70s illustrates the truth-fatigue that results from autocratic rule and pervasive, organised deceit. First, the declaration of Sulla as *hostis* ushered in what Rosenblitt has termed a period of 'hostile politics' (so called because of the rising tendency to treat political rivals—*inimici*—like enemies of the state—*hostes*).³³ In the *Histories*, we see this destabilisation of categories extended in both directions, as civil and foreign conflicts become indistinguishable; their categorisation depends not on their true nature but on the advantage of the speaker at any given moment. Second, I will argue that Licinius Macer's speech in the *Histories* illustrates the pervasiveness of the modern lie by demonstrating that Macer too has been afflicted by apathy towards the truth. As a historian he perhaps ought

³⁰ Octavian/Augustus' most famous declaration to this effect comes much later, in the *Res Gestae* (*mare pacavi a praedonibus*, 25.1), but we may assume that, for this shorthand reference to have been effective, this rhetoric had been employed frequently against Sextus during his lifetime.

³¹ The triumvir learned along the way, and his destruction of the memory of the *bellum civile* against Sextus Pompey was more successful than his attempt to efface the Perusine War. A hostile tradition persisting well into the empire preserved a rumour that after Perugia Octavian ordered the sacrifice of 300 senators and equites at an altar to the deified Julius Caesar (Suet. *Aug.* 15; Cass. Dio, 48.14.4; cf. the allusion at Sen. *Clem.* 1.11). Sextus Pompey, on the other hand, is able to be dismissed in the *RGDA* as nothing but an anonymous pirate (*RGDA* 25.1).

³² See Eckert (2014) and (2016).

³³ Rosenblitt (2016) and (2019) 115–39.

to be an independent critic, but as a participant in public life Macer cannot overcome the corrosive effects of organised lying.

Civil/Foreign in the Histories

The 70s and 60s were marked by a number of major conflicts, both foreign and civil. The *Histories* certainly covered the revolt of Lepidus, the Sertorian War, the Spartacus War, and Lucullus' campaigns against Mithridates; the domestic turmoil over the restoration of the tribunes' rights seems to have played a central role as well. During this period, at least as depicted by Sallust, the difference between foreign and civil wars becomes contested as individuals manipulated the parameters of 'citizen' and 'enemy' to suit their own purposes. As has already been noted, Rosenblitt has discussed the rise in 'hostile politics' at this time, or the tendency for political rivals to treat each other as *hostes* rather than *inimici*. Sallust also highlights this slippage between 'civil' and 'foreign' in the *Histories* not only by depicting his characters engaging in the elision of these categories but also by demonstrating this himself in his capacity as historian by blurring the distinctions between 'Roman' and 'barbarian' in his own characterisations.

From a 'public relations' perspective, the Sertorian War was particularly thorny for Sertorius' opponents. Although Sertorius' supporters consisted of both Romans (including other proscribed citizens) and non-Romans, Sertorius himself was most certainly a Roman citizen and former magistrate; war against Sertorius was a civil war. Furthermore, the war against Sertorius far outlived Sulla, and in the fragile years that followed Sulla's death, the continued pursuit of the proscribed may have struck some as a distasteful vestige of Sulla's programme. For Pompey, who had eagerly sought the command against Sertorius after Metellus' unsuccessful campaign, the solution to the problematic optics (and a technicality that might keep him from celebrating a triumph)³⁴ was simple: declare that it was a foreign war against the Spanish tribes and leave Sertorius out of the matter entirely. Thus, to celebrate his victory in Spain (3.63):

... de victis Hispanis tropaea in Pyrenaei iugis constituit.

³⁴ The conventional belief is that a triumph could only be celebrated for a victory over a foreign enemy, not a Roman citizen: see, e.g., Beard (2007), though Lange (2016) has recently questioned that assumption.

... he set up the trophies on the ridges of the Pyrenees for his conquests of the Spanish.

Later sources confirm what we might guess from this fragment: Pompey intentionally omitted Sertorius from his celebration in order to maintain his eligibility for a triumph and, perhaps more importantly, to distance himself from the associations of Sulla and civil war.³⁵

Pompey is one of several characters in the *Histories* to be granted his own voice in *oratio recta* (in Pompey's case, in the form of a letter to the senate).³⁶ The letter of Pompey purports to be a missive to the senate in 75 BCE in which Pompey complains that he has been given insufficient resources to pursue Sertorius and instructs the senate to send supplies and reinforcements. He opens the letter with a counterfactual reference to civil war, implicitly raising from the very start the question of whether he should be regarded as an enemy of Rome (*Hist.* 2.86.1):

Si advorsus vos patriamque et deos penatis tot labores et pericula suscepissem, quotiens a prima adulescentia ductu meo scelestissimi hostes fusi et vobis salus quaesita est, nihil amplius in absentem me statuissetis quam adhuc agitis, patres conscripti ...

If I had undertaken so many hardships and dangers acting *against* you and my country and my gods all those times since my earliest youth when, under my leadership, your most detestable enemies were routed and your safety was secured, you could have decreed nothing worse against me in my absence than what you are doing until now, conscript fathers ...

The proposition is raised as a counterfactual ('If I *had* waged a civil war, which of course I *didn't*'), but of course has a similar effect to *praeteritio*: it

³⁵ See Plin. *HN* 7.96 and App. 1.108; cf. Florus 2.10.1: *Bellum Sertorianum quid amplius quam Sullanae proscriptionis hereditas fuit? hostile potius an civile dixerim nescio, quippe quod Lusitani Celtiberique Romano gesserint duce ... victores duces externum id magis quam civile bellum videri voluerunt, uti triumpharent* ('What more was the Sertorian war than the legacy of the Sullan proscriptions? I do not know whether to call it a war against a foreign enemy or a civil war, because the Lusitani and Celtiberi fought under a Roman general ... The victorious leaders wanted it to be considered a foreign rather than civil war so that they could celebrate a triumph').

³⁶ *Hist.* 2.86.

implicitly plants the possibility in the mind of the audience while explicitly disavowing it. Sallust's Pompey thus creates an adversarial relationship between himself and the senate (and, by extension, Rome) from the very beginning of his letter and reminds his readers how easily he could become a *hostis*, so mutable have the categories of 'citizen' and 'enemy' become.

In the conclusion of the letter, Pompey blurs the distinction between civil and foreign conflicts in another way: by assimilating himself with Hannibal, Rome's *hostis par excellence*.³⁷ The body of the letter is devoted to Pompey's complaints about poor conditions in Spain and his demands for aid. In his closing, he bolsters his demands with a threat (*Hist.* 2.86.10):

Reliqui vos estis: qui nisi subvenitis, invito et praedicente me exercitus hinc et cum eo omne bellum Hispaniae in Italiam transgradientur.

You are all that's left: unless you help, although I am unwilling but as I forewarned, my army will cross over from here into Italy, and with it the entire Spanish war.

For the internal audience of the letter (the senate), the image of an army invading from the west and pouring over the Alps into Italy could not have evoked anything other than the memory of Hannibal's invasion; Pompey thus identifies himself with Rome's most feared foreign enemy. Although the geographical origin was different (the west instead of the east), this threat might also have reminded the senate of Sulla's recent violent marches on the city. For Sallust's readers in the 30s, Pompey's suggestion may have also brought to mind Caesar's march from Gaul or, in even more recent memory, Octavian's. With his threat to march his army into Italy, Pompey thus creates a multivalent allusion and ends the letter as he began it, by blurring the distinction between foreign and civil threat.

In addition to depicting the characters in his narrative as engaged in this kind of dissembling, Sallust himself demonstrates the mutability of traditional categorisations in his own narrative voice. We see the elision of boundaries between 'foreign' and 'barbarian' in Sallust's depiction of the gladiator Spartacus (*Hist.* 4.27):

dissidere inter se coepere neque in medium consultare.

³⁷ Gerrish (2019) 83 and Rosenblitt (2019) 106–8.

They began to be divided among themselves and did not deliberate together.

This fragment describes a disagreement between Spartacus and two other leaders of the revolt, Gaius Gannicius and Castus. Maurenbrecher assigned this fragment to the Spartacus War narrative on the strength of its similarity with a parallel passage in Plutarch's *Life of Crassus*.³⁸ However, without that point of reference, one could just as plausibly assign this fragment to any debate in the Roman senate, since Sallust's language is taken straight from the Roman deliberative sphere. In late republican and triumviral literature, *dissidere* and *consultare* are frequently employed in a political context to describe public figures or governing bodies, not 'barbarians' like the runaway slaves.³⁹ For example, *consultare* appears five other times in the Sallustian corpus, in each instance referring to a formal civic body (specifically Roman senators in three of the other four examples).⁴⁰

Although this example is brief, it is an excellent case study in the volatility of the categories of 'Roman' and 'foreign' (and, in turn, *bellum civile* and *bellum iustum*). Sallust's slave-revolt leaders do not behave like the barbarian archetypes his readers may have come to expect from historiographical accounts of earlier slave revolts.⁴¹ Barbarians 'should' engage in trickery,

³⁸ Plut. *Crass.* 11. On Plutarch's use of the *Histories* as a source, see Peter (1865) in general and Konrad (1994) and Tröster (2008) as examples of studies of specific *Lives* (*Sertorius* and *Lucullus*, respectively).

³⁹ Cf. the following in addition to 4.27: (1) In the *Histories*, the inhabitants of Isaura Nova debate how to respond to the Roman attack: *inter quae trepida cunctisque in unum tumultuose consultantibus Servilius futilem deditionem ratus, ni met<u>s urgeret ...* ('In such alarm, while they were all debating together in confusion, Servilius, reckoning that surrender was hopeless to wish for unless fear provoked it ...' (2.74D)); (2) in the preface of the *Catiline*, Sallust describes Rome's noble ancestors: *delecti, quibus corpus annis infirmum, ingenium sapientia validum erat, rei publicae consultabant* ('The chosen ones, to whom the body was weak with age but the spirit was strong in wisdom, deliberated about the republic', *Cat.* 6.6); (3) Sallust's Caesar advises open-minded deliberation: *Omnis homines, patres conscripti, qui de rebus dubiis consultant, ab odio, amicitia, ira atque misericordia vacuos esse decet* ('It is fitting, conscript fathers, for all men who deliberate about uncertain matters to be free from hatred, affection, anger, and pity', *Cat.* 51.1); (4) Sallust's Cato calls upon the senate to act against the conspirators: *Res autem monet cavere ab illis magis quam quid in illos statuamus consultare* ('The affair warns us, moreover, to guard against them rather than deliberate about what we should decide about them', *Cat.* 52.3).

⁴⁰ This is the only extant use of *dissidere* by Sallust.

⁴¹ See, for example, Diodorus Siculus' depictions of Eunus and Salvius in his accounts of the First and Second Sicilian Slave Wars (Books 34–6).

sophistry, and deception, and they should not ‘govern’ their rebellion through rational deliberation; their conflicts should be resolved in a brawl or some other violent or theatrical means, and certainly should not be depicted as mere ‘disagreements’. Sallust’s description of these runaway gladiators⁴² with the language of the Roman public sphere turns them into pseudo-magistrates and casts them in a role that is discordant with their identities. Non-Romans suddenly appear Roman; this, in turn, reframes their revolt as a double civil war (both internally, among the revolt leaders, and externally, as “Romans” against the Roman state). Sallust has imitated the triumvirs, but in reverse: he has deployed clever language to create civil war where it did not exist, just as the triumvirs used specious language to deny the very real civil wars in which they were engaged. Sallust thus reinforces as narrator what the characters of his narrative have enacted: in the fallout of the modern lie, truth and falsity have not simply become inverted, but rather have become meaningless.

Macer as Failed Truth-Teller

If, as I have suggested, part of the *Histories*’ message is that historiography plays a crucial role in the preservation of truth, we might expect that the historian who actually appears in the narrative would be a useful vehicle for Sallust’s reflections on the subject. C. Licinius Macer, tribune of 73 BCE and author of an *ab urbe condita* history of Rome, delivers one of the *Histories*’ four surviving speeches, a forceful harangue of the complacency of the plebs (*Hist.* 3.15). There are multiple reasons to believe Macer’s speech played an important thematic role in the history. As far as we can tell, nothing *demand*ed the inclusion of a speech by Macer in particular in the *Histories*.⁴³ The restoration of tribunician rights was a contentious issue in the 70s, and if Sallust wanted to include a representative speech, he surely had options in terms of speakers and occasions. Without the context of Macer’s speech, we cannot say for certain whether the narrative required it or whether Sallust had some other reason to include it. However, there are several suggestions in the text that its inclusion was more than just a historical necessity or

⁴² It is worth noting that the gladiator occupied a complicated position in the Roman imaginary during the late republic and triumviral years. They served as handy examples of both bravery and steadfastness in the face of certain death (e.g., Cic. *Mil.* 92); on the other hand, they also represented baseness and criminality, and so *gladiator* often served as a term of political abuse (e.g., Cic. *Cat.* 2.4.7; *Pis.* 28).

⁴³ Syme (1964) 200: ‘Nor is Licinius Macer’s intervention the cause or consequence of any important transaction.’

required by the plot. First, as has already been noted, Macer was himself a historian. Wiseman has suggested that when a historian grants a direct voice to another historian within his narrative, ‘it can hardly be innocent of intertextual allusion’.⁴⁴ Likewise, I would suggest that when a historian gives voice to another historian, it can also hardly be innocent of programmatic or historiographical significance, particularly in a work with such abundant meta-historical reflection as the *Histories*.⁴⁵

We might also expect Macer’s speech to play an important programmatic role because of Sallust’s apparent identification with the real Macer’s historiographical approach. It has often been claimed that Sallust was sympathetic to Macer and viewed him as a genuine advocate for rights of the tribunes and the people.⁴⁶ While this claim is debatable, the remains of Macer’s history suggest that, as historians, Sallust and Macer may have shared some similar views.⁴⁷ The character of Macer’s work is elusive due to its poor preservation, but we can make some informed guesses. It has generally been assumed that Macer’s history had a strong pro-plebeian bent, although this is based more in plausibility than on the evidence of the fragments themselves.⁴⁸ Perhaps more to Sallust’s interest was Macer’s depiction of the role of fratricide in the city’s foundation. Macer may have been the source for the versions of the origin story presented by Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in which the role of the brothers’ dispute in the foundation of the city is emphasised.⁴⁹ The Byzantine chronographer John Malalas’ version of the Romulus and Remus story is bleaker than that of either Dionysius or Livy: according to Malalas, Romulus’ murder of Remus brought curses upon the Roman people, not least of which was their

⁴⁴ Wiseman (2006) 298.

⁴⁵ Cf. Tacitus’ Cremutius Cordus (*Ann.* 4.34–5).

⁴⁶ E.g., La Penna (1963) 241, Syme (1964) 200, Pasoli (1976) 108–9, Latta (1999) 226–8 and 325–9.

⁴⁷ Macer’s work survives in fragments far scantier than Sallust’s *Histories*; depending on the editor, the fragments number about thirty: Oakley (2013) includes 33 fragments; Walt (1997) 29, Chassignet (2004), and Beck–Walter (2004) 26. The scope of the work is not securely known, but it began at least as early as the life of Romulus and went at least through 299 BCE; Oakley posits that the absence of Macer from Livy’s Books 21–45 suggests that Macer’s narrative ended before 218.

⁴⁸ Hodgkinson (1997a) 1 and 25 traces the lineage of this assumption (and the accompanying 19th-century disdain) back to Mommsen.

⁴⁹ Livy 1.7.1–2; D.H. *AR* 1.87.1–4. Cf. Wiseman (1995) 143, Hodgkinson (1997b), and Oakley (2013) 321.

damnation to eternally recurring civil strife.⁵⁰ If, as Hodgkinson argues, this is a reflection of Malalas' Licinian source, it sounds as if Macer's version of the story was characterised by a preoccupation with factionalism and the reiterative nature of strife that would have resonated with Sallust.⁵¹ It is also worth noting that Cicero expressed disapproval of Macer's historiographical style; given Sallust's opposition to Cicero's conception of history and historiography, this may well have commended Macer to Sallust.⁵² A subtle linguistic allusion in Macer's speech underscores the connection between the two historians:

... quom interim more pecorum vos, multitudo, singulis habendos fruendos praebetis ... (*Hist.* 3.15.6)

... meanwhile, you, the mob, like a herd of cattle you offer yourselves up to be controlled and exploited by individuals ...

Omnis homines qui sese student praestare ceteris animalibus summa ope niti decet ni vitam silentio transeant, veluti pecora, quae natura prona atque ventri oboedientia finxit. (*Cat.* 1.1)

It is befitting for all men who desire to surpass other animals to strive with the greatest effort lest they pass through their lives in silence, like cattle, whom nature has made hunched over and obedient to their appetite.

The repetition of *pecus* here links Macer's speech to the famous programmatic opening passage of the *Catiline*, in which Sallust reflects on his decision to leave public life and spend his retirement writing history. From the extant fragments of the *Histories*, it appears that the preface did not contain an explicit discussion of the purpose and value of historiography, unlike the monographs (cf. *Cat.* 3, 8; *Jug.* 4).⁵³ Rather, as has already been mentioned, Sallust has woven multiple strands of historiographical reflection throughout

⁵⁰ Hodgkinson (1997b) 86.

⁵¹ Cf. Thuc. 3.82.2.

⁵² On Sallust's view of Ciceronian historiography, see Woodman (1988) 117–28. Wiseman (1995) 143–4 goes so far as to speculate that it was Cicero's antagonism towards Macer that damned him to literary obscurity, at least in his own lifetime.

⁵³ Scanlon (1998), esp. 223–4.

the *Histories*.⁵⁴ Given that the repetition of *pecus* connects the *Histories* in general (and specifically Macer's speech) to an earlier commentary on history's value, we might understand this allusion as linking Sallust's Macer to Sallust himself, reinforcing the parallel between the two as fellow historians.

However, if we expect Sallust's Macer to demonstrate successfully the triumph of the historian over the modern lie, we are disappointed. Macer seems to self-identify as a type of truth-teller and Sallust's depiction is somewhat sympathetic, if not wholly positive, but upon closer reading it is clear that Macer is simply performing a 'more subtle version of the corrupt language topos'⁵⁵ but is not, in reality, as removed from the concomitant corrosion of language and truth as he might like to believe. In a passage that has close parallels with remarks in the *Histories'* preface,⁵⁶ Macer argues that politicians on 'both sides of the aisle', so to speak, are guilty of concealing their true motives with more noble claims, and exhorts his audience to remain vigilant against this dissimulation (*Hist.* 3.15.11–13):

Quae profecto incassum agebantur, si prius quam vos serviundi finem, illi dominationis facturi erant, praesertim cum his civilibus armis dicta alia, sed certatum utrimque de dominatione in vobis sit. Itaque cetera ex licentia aut odio aut avaritia in tempus arsere; permansit una res modo, quae utrimque quaesita est et erepta in posterum: vis tribunicia, telum a maioribus libertati paratum. Quod ego vos moneo quaesoque ut animadvortatis neu nomina rerum ad ignavium mutantes otium pro servitio adpelletis.

⁵⁴ Gerrish (2019), esp. 73–105.

⁵⁵ Spielberg (2017) 345.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Hist.* 1.12: *Postquam remoto metu Punico simultates exercere vacuum fuit, plurimae turbae, seditiones et ad postremum bella civilia orta sunt, dum pauci potentes, quorum in gratiam plerique concesserant, sub honesto patrum aut plebis nomine dominationes adfectabant, bonique et mali cives adpellati non ob merita in rem publicam omnibus pariter corruptis, sed uti quisque locupletissimus et iniuria validior, quia praesentia defendebat, pro bono ducebatur* ('Later, when the Punic threat was removed, there was an opening for them to cultivate disputes, and many riots, civil disturbances, and, at last, civil wars arose, while the powerful few, under whose influence most had fallen, were aiming for tyrannies under the honourable name of the senate or the plebs, and citizens were called 'good' or 'bad' not according to their worthiness of the republic, since everyone was equally corrupt; but as each man was most wealthy and could inflict the greatest harm, he was considered good, because he was protecting the status quo').

But indeed, this was in vain, if they were planning to make an end to their tyranny before you put an end to your slavery, especially since, while other pretences have been spoken in this civil war, the struggle on both sides has been for tyranny over you. And so other things have flared up temporarily out of presumptuousness or hatred or jealousy; just one matter persists, which is contested on both sides and has been taken away from you for the future: the tribunician power, a weapon granted to you by your ancestors to fight for freedom. I advise you—I even beg you—to pay attention and not to exchange the true names of things out of cowardice and substitute the name ‘tranquillity’ for slavery.

So far, so good; Macer’s critique of those who use favourable terms to cover up their self-interest is non-partisan, as he implicates not only the aristocracy but also the self-identified champions of the people (in which number he himself might be counted). In doing so, as Spielberg has noted, Macer attempts to position himself as independent from the culture of truth-fatigue which has taken hold in the post-Sulla years.⁵⁷ The hopes of Sallust’s audience are deflated, however, by the solution Macer offers: the full restoration of the powers of the tribunes. Sallust’s readers will know that this did not have the effect Macer claimed it would. Furthermore, very careful readers of Sallust will recall that this particular historical moment was cited by Sallust as yet another catalyst for the breakdown of representation and reality (*Cat.* 38):

Nam postquam Cn. Pompeio et M. Crasso consulibus tribunicia potestas restituta est, homines adulescentes summam potestatem nacti, quibus aetas animusque ferox erat, coepere senatum criminando plebem exagitare, dein largiundo atque pollicitando magis incendere, ita ipsi clari potentesque fieri. Contra eos summa ope nitebatur pleraque nobilitas senatus specie pro sua magnitudine. Namque, uti paucis verum absolvam, post illa tempora quicumque rem publicam agitavere honestis nominibus, alii sicuti populi iura defenderent, pars quo senatus auctoritas maxuma foret, bonum publicum simulantes pro sua quisque potentia certabant. Neque illis modestia neque modus contentionis erat: utrique victoriam crudeliter exercebant.

For when the power of the tribunes was restored during the consulship

⁵⁷ Spielberg (2017) 346.

of Gn. Pompeius and M. Crassus, those young men who had achieved the highest power and whose age and temperaments were fierce first began to agitate the common people by criticising the senate, and later inflamed their spirits even more with bribery and promises, thus becoming famous and powerful themselves. Many of nobility fought back against them under the pretence of supporting the senate but really in search of their own advancement. For, to put it briefly, after that time there were those who attacked the republic under honourable-sounding terms—some under the pretence that they were defending the rights of the people, others allegedly strengthening the senate as much as possible—but all of them were feigning their interest in the public good and each was striving for his own individual power. There was no restraint or moderation in their efforts; both sides used their victory cruelly.

Sallust's audience already knows the outcome of Macer's suggestion, and it is by no means a correction to the disruptions of language and truth; it only underscores the ease with which labels can be manipulated in a climate where political lies have obliterated the will of the exhausted people to insist upon truth. Although his associations with Sallust himself might have set the reader's expectation that he will serve as a proxy for the truth-teller Sallust, Macer ultimately reinforces the *Histories'* trenchant pessimism.

Why does Macer fail where we might have expected him to succeed? Let us return to Arendt's conception of the truth-teller: 'Outstanding among the existential modes of truth-telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter'.⁵⁸ Historians are among those identified as figures who might play this role, but that identification is predicated on the assumption that they operate outside the political sphere. Macer, however, was deeply embedded in politics. After serving as tribune of the plebs in 73 he went on to the praetorship in 68 and was governor of an unidentified province in 67;⁵⁹ he was found guilty of extortion in 66 and, according to Plutarch, died suddenly upon hearing the verdict.⁶⁰ Unlike Sallust, Macer thus did not 'save' history-

⁵⁸ Arendt (1968) 310.

⁵⁹ Oakley (2013) 321 explains that, since Macer was *repetundarum reus* and his trial presided over by Cicero as praetor, it is safe to assume he was indicted for extortion as a provincial governor.

⁶⁰ Plut. *Cic.* 9.1–2.

writing for his retirement (not that he ultimately enjoyed one); his histories were composed in the context of his political career. Macer's speech in the *Histories* thus demonstrates the limitations of the politically active historian in contesting the modern political lie. He cannot but be implicated so long as he remains in the political sphere, for he lacks the perspective to truly recognise the deleterious effects of the modern lie.⁶¹

IV. Conclusions

Macer's failure reinforces Sallust's assertion that his own removal from politics is the key to his ability to wrest the truth from the hands of the triumvirs and serve as its guardian. If the historian's role is that of truth-teller, the ideal historian is the one who is not only removed from public life himself but who also uses history to respond to contemporary events and concerns. In the preface of the *Catiline*, Sallust asserts that there is value in serving the state with words rather than deeds (*Cat.* 3.1):

Pulchrum est bene facere rei publicae, etiam bene dicere haud absurdum est.

It is noble to act well on behalf of the state, but it is also not useless to speak well for it.

It is impossible to know whether Sallust truly believed this or whether this is how he consoled himself on his expulsion from politics, but if we take his claim at face value, we can read Sallust's writing of an (allegorically) contemporary history as his means of continuing to contribute to the state. Just as Sallust's literary descendant Tacitus observed of life under the principate, there was a ceiling on what could be achieved politically under the triumvirs. Rather than a practical political option, Sallust seems to offer the writing of history, and in particular *contemporary* history, as a useful alternative to politics. While he could not impact the *events* of history, he could shape their memory. The allusive nature of the *Histories'* contemporary narrative renders it timeless: just as these things have happened before, they are happening again now, and will continue to happen provided that human

⁶¹ It may not be a coincidence that Sertorius and Spartacus, the two figures who seem to have received the most favourable treatment in the *Histories*, are political outsiders.

nature remains the same.⁶² The *Histories* showed the disastrous outcomes of the apathy towards truth that pervaded the 70s, and Sallust is not especially subtle in drawing a line between the narrative and his own world. Sallust guides the reader like a ‘Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’; by reminding his contemporaries how similar circumstances played out in the past, he points his audience to the likely outcomes of their current situation if nothing were to be done differently this time. The *Histories* could thus awaken Sallust’s fellow Romans from their truth-fatigue and alert them to the inevitably catastrophic results of *not* resisting the ‘triumviral truths’ (autocracy, loss of *libertas*, endless civil war).

It seems highly unlikely that the *Histories* were an exhortation for *all* Romans to write narrative contemporary histories (for one thing, the competition would be bad for business!). So, once shaken from their complacency, what could the majority of Sallust’s readers have possibly hoped to accomplish? Individually, not much; collectively, still little. The triumvirs’ power was essentially absolute by the time Sallust probably began the *Histories* in 39 BCE. Any moderation of their use of power was more likely to be strategic and self-exercised rather than motivated by public resistance. If, like Sallust, his readers could not *bene facere rei publicae*, perhaps (also like Sallust) they could *bene dicere* and refuse to let the triumviral narrative stand unchallenged. The modern lie relies upon complacency for its success, but Sallust’s reader could refuse to succumb to the intellectual exhaustion brought on by organised lying. Doing so may have changed nothing about the track of history, but perhaps there was still value in fighting for the preservation of truth, ‘the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us’.⁶³

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⁶² Cf. Thuc. 1.22.

⁶³ Arendt (1968) 312.

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