

The Verbs Make the Man:
A Reading of Caesar, *Gallic War*
1.7 and *Civil War* 1.1 and 3.2¹

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For James T. Horan (1956–2017)

Caesar is back. To say that the most renowned, influential, and indeed infamous figure from ancient Rome ever faded from public view would be incorrect. But Caesar the writer is, to be sure, undergoing a twenty-first-century comeback, with a revival of interest in recent years in his works the *Gallic War*, which covers his imperialist exploits in Gaul in the years 58–50 bce, and the *Civil War*, which covers the internecine conflicts of the years 49–48 bce. New texts and translations have recently appeared or are on the way,² and several scholarly works from this century put their

¹ This paper was delivered at the 110th Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of New England, held at Smith College in March 2016. For feedback I am thankful to the audience members at Smith and to *NECJ*'s anonymous referee. I am also grateful to two groups with whom I read and discussed these passages prior to the presentation: the students in the Fall 2015 course "Julius Caesar in the Roman Literary Imagination" at the College of the Holy Cross, and the members of the Rhode Island Latin reading group, which is generously hosted by Ruth Breindel. The paper is dedicated to the memory of James T. Horan (1956–2017), my second-year Latin teacher at Loyola Academy (Wilmette, IL), who introduced me to Caesar and to many of the joys of learning and teaching Latin. The text I have used for the *BG* is Du Pontet (1900) and, for the *BC*, Damon (2015a). Translations are my own.

² See the new Oxford Classical Text of the *BC* by Damon (2015a), as well as the Loeb translation of the *BC* by Damon (2016); the translation of the *BC* and the *Alexandrian War*, the *African War*, and the *Spanish War* (each of which was written by other authors) by Carter (2008); and the translation of the complete Caesarian oeuvre by Raaflaub (2017).

focus more on Caesar the *auctor* than Caesar the *actor*.³ Moreover, in one of his latest posthumous triumphs, in 2012–13 Caesar marched his way onto the Advanced Placement Latin reading list — selections from the *Gallic War* now stand on the AP syllabus alongside selections from Virgil’s *Aeneid* as crowning texts for many a high school Latin student. Reading Caesar is, once again,⁴ a hot ticket.

However, more than one student has described Caesar’s Latin to me not as “hot” but as dry, bland. Reading the accounts of campaigns, encampments, and calculated conquests can be, it is said, something of a slog. With this paper I would like to address in brief this not uncommon protestation from Caesar’s readers. I will make the case for the liveliness of Caesar’s writing through a focus on one particular element of his style: his selection and use of verbs for pointed characterization.

Before turning to a few passages in the *Gallic War* and *Civil War* that I hope will demonstrate the vitality of Caesar’s employment of verbs, it is worth recalling that Caesar’s selectiveness in diction has long been noted, first of all by his Roman contemporaries.⁵ His ally Aulus Hirtius, the author of the eighth book of the *Gallic War*, wrote in that book’s preface: “For it is agreed among all that nothing has been produced so elaborately by others that it is not surpassed by the refinement of these commentaries” (*BG* 8.1.4: *constat enim inter omnes nihil tam operose ab aliis esse perfectum, quod non horum elegantia commentariorum superetur*). A little bit later in this same passage, Hirtius writes: “For in Caesar existed both the greatest facility and refinement in writing and the truest ability to explain his own plans” (*BG* 8.1.7: *erat autem in Caesare cum facultas atque elegantia summa scribendi, tum verissima scientia suorum consiliorum explicandorum*). In both of these passages Hirtius underscores Caesar’s *elegantia*, his refinement or pickiness – note that this noun derives from the verb *eligo*, “to pick out.”⁶ In a discussion about Caesar’s oratory in Cicero’s dialogue *Brutus*, the interlocutor Atticus states that Caesar himself stressed the importance

3 See Riggsby (2006), Batstone and Damon (2006), and Grillo (2012), as well as the volume of essays edited by Grillo and Krebs (2018). Kraus (2009) is a helpful overview of Caesarian style in the *BG*.

4 For many years the *BG* stood as a standard second-year Latin text in Europe and the U.S.

5 See Kraus (2005) and Grillo (2012, pp. 1–5) on ancient and modern assessments of Caesar’s style. Breindel considers the role of scribes in the composition of the *BG*, provides a collection of ancient verdicts of Caesar’s style (2016, pp. 268–279).

6 Cicero etymologizes *elegans* in this way at *N^D* 2.72. On the etymology and development of *elegans* / *elegantia*, see Krostenko (2001, pp. 34–39), who offers the definition “careful aesthetic choice” (p. 35). See too the definition of the term at *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 4.12.17: *elegantia est quae facit ut locus unus quisque pure et aperte dici videatur* (“*Elegantia* is that which makes it so that each and every matter seems to be described with purity and clarity”). Garcea offers an extensive discussion of the term (2012, pp. 49–124).

of selectiveness in his lost work *De Analogia*: “In the first book [Caesar] said that the choice of words is the starting-place of eloquence” (*Brutus* 253: *primoque in libro dixit verborum dilectum originem esse eloquentiae*). In a more recent discussion of Caesar’s choice of verbs in particular, William Batstone and Cynthia Damon write, “As one might expect, verbs in Caesar are typically practical rather than colorful. They represent war’s *res gestae*.”⁷ But they go on to note, when looking at a passage from Book 2 of the *Civil War*, that “every verb is simple and precise: everyday verbs composed for maximum effect.”⁸

In what follows I will examine Caesar’s *dilectus verborum*, and in particular his use of “everyday verbs ... for maximum effect,” by looking at three critical passages, with a focus on the verbs that the author employs: first, Caesar’s self-introduction, his first appearance as a character in the *commentarii*, at *Gallic War* 1.7; then, Caesar’s first presentation of himself as consul for the year 48 bce, at the beginning of Book 3 of the *Civil War* (3.2); finally, I will go back to the opening of the *Civil War* to consider Caesar’s depiction of one of the consuls for the year 49, Lentulus Crus. This exercise could, I am confident, be practiced on any number of passages in Caesar’s *commentarii*. But these three passages are in conspicuous and meaningful places in the two works; the powerful deployment of verbs in these prominent passages makes a strong impression on readers and demands that they be attentive to his choice of verbs in the works as a whole.

THE FIRST ACTIONS OF CAESAR’S CAESAR

After the introductory sketch of Gaul in *Gallic War* 1.1, Caesar commits the next five chapters (1.2–6) to an account of the plans of the Helvetii in the year 58 bce. With their leader Orgetrix now dead, they have burnt up all of their settlements, and are ready to march west through Geneva, a settlement held by the Allobroges, and then into the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis (an area also known as Transalpine Gaul or “our province”). After bringing readers up to speed on the plans of the Helvetii, Caesar pivots and turns to his own actions:

⁷ Batstone and Damon (2006, p. 158).

⁸ Batstone and Damon, on *BC* 2.11 (2006, p. 160).

(1) *Caesari cum id nuntiatum esset, eos per prouinciam nostram iter facere conari, maturat ab urbe proficisci et quam maximis potest itineribus in Galliam ulteriorem contendit et ad Genauam peruenit.* (2) *Prouinciae toti quam maximum potest militum numerum imperat (erat omnino in Gallia ulteriore legio una), pontem qui erat ad Genauam iubet rescindi.* BG 1.7.1-2

(1) “When it had been announced to Caesar that they [the Helvetii] were trying to conduct a march through our province [Transalpine Gaul], he hastens to set out from the city and, in the longest marches that were possible, he strides into further Gaul and arrives in Geneva. (2) From the entire province he orders as many troops as possible (in all of further Gaul there was one legion); the bridge to Geneva he orders to be cut down.”

We see that, in the very first sentence in which Caesar appears as a character, he is unmistakably presented as a man of action. His activity comes in response to the threat of the Helvetii — a condition underscored by his entrance in the dative case, not the nominative.⁹ However, once the news about the Helvetian incursion reaches him, Caesar gets immediately on the move. Within this one sentence he moves quickly from Rome (*ab urbe*) into Gaul (*in Galliam*) and then to Geneva (*ad Genauam*), with each of the three verbs in the sentence capturing his movement. The latter two, *contendit* and *peruenit*, include prefixes that underscore Caesar’s exertion: *con-**tendo* means to “really strain”¹⁰ and the prefix *per-* (“thoroughly”) before *uenit* hammers home Caesar’s arrival – a feat that is also emphasized by the placement of this verb, neatly, efficiently, at the end of the sentence.¹¹ The verbs are in the present tense, a choice that reinforces the sense of liveliness already existing in these verbs of motion.¹² Further, the move from the pluperfect verb *nuntiatum esset* in the opening

9 Kraus (2009, p. 169).

10 Note that the prefix *con-* can express “intensity of action” (*OLD* 5) and “completeness” (*OLD* 6).

11 Kraus discusses a traditional but evocative characteristic of verbs such as this: the use of singular forms to describe the movement of Caesar’s entire army. Of the verbs in *BG* 7.8.1-4, a comparable passage that narrates Caesar’s march into Arvenian territory, she writes: “His is the forward movement and the preparation before it; his too the epiphany.” (2009, p. 161).

12 On the historic present see Quintilian, *IO* 9.3.11, where he includes it in a discussion of metaphor (*transferuntur et tempora*, “tenses are also exchanged”), as well as Schlicher, writing that “[t]he most striking and characteristic use of the historical present . . . is found in passages which record a swift succession of acts performed in a tense and exciting situation” (1931, p. 49); and Pinkster (2015, pp. 401-9). Oldsjö (2001) is a detailed study of Caesar’s use of tense.

cum clause to the present verbs *maturat*, *contendit* and *peruenit* makes us feel the present-ness and vibrancy of Caesar’s actions all the more strongly. Perhaps Caesar’s most important verb choice in this sentence is his first one, which is, let us recall, the first verb he uses of himself in the *Gallic War*: *maturat*. *Maturo* means, primarily, “to ripen, bring to maturity” (*OCD* 1) and thus “to perform or finish in good time, speed” (*OCD* 2). Caesar’s movement is not simply swift; it is well timed, appropriately timed action.¹³

If the first sentence in 1.7 presents Caesar as a man of efficient movement and timely action, the second sentence establishes him as a man of authority, with the pair of common, straightforward verbs *imperat* and *iubet* that he uses of his levying of a draft. Moreover, Caesar makes it clear that these commands are as effective as they are straightforward: there is no further mention of the process of this draft or the destruction of the bridge to Geneva. There need not be. What Caesar orders happens.

Caesar then continues his account – and his self-introduction – by writing:

(3) ubi de eius aduentu Heluetii certiores facti sunt, legatos ad eum mittunt nobilissimos civitatis, cuius legationis Nammeius et Verucloetius principem locum obtinebant, qui dicerent sibi esse in animo sine ullo maleficio iter per provinciam facere, propterea quod aliud iter haberent nullum: rogare ut eius voluntate id sibi facere liceat. Caesar, quod memoria tenebat L. Cassium consulem occisum exercitumque eius ab Helvetiis pulsum et sub iugum missum, concedendum non putabat; (4) neque homines inimico animo, data facultate per provinciam itineris faciendi, temperaturos ab iniuria et maleficio existimabat. (5) tamen, ut spatium intercedere posset dum milites quos imperaverat convenirent, legatis respondit diem se ad deliberandum sumpturum: si quid vellent, ad Id. April. reverterentur. BG 1.7.3-5

(3) When the Helvetii became more certain about his arrival, they send to him as legates the most noble men in their state; Nammeius and Verucloetius were holding the principal position in this delegation, and they said that they intended to make a march through the province,

¹³ On Caesar’s presentation of himself as a man of timeliness, not just quickness, see Grillo (with a focus on the *BC*) (2012, pp. 14-36). On his speed, see too Stadter (1993), a discussion of *BC* 1.66-70.

without any wrongdoing, because they had no other route; and that they were asking to be allowed to make the march with his approval. Caesar, because he kept in his memory that the consul Lucius Cassius had been killed and his army had been beaten by the Helvetii and sent under the yoke, was thinking (parsing in his mind) that this should not be allowed. (4) And he thought (estimated) that men of hostile spirits, when given the opportunity to march through the province, would not refrain from harm and wrongdoing. (5) Nevertheless, so that time could pass while the troops he had levied could gather, he responded to the legates that he would take some time to think about it (to weigh options): if they wanted anything, they could return on the Ides of April.

This man of action and authority is also, we learn now, a man of deep thought and planning. He knows how to keep in mind (*memoria tenebat*) events from the past, such as the consul Cassius' loss to a tribe of Helvetii in 107 bce; and he knows how to use this past disaster as an instructive *exemplum* for present action. For the subsequent sentences in this passage, I have translated the forms of *puto*, *existimo*, and *delibero* in two different ways: with a form of “to think,” a common translation for each verb, but also (in parentheses) in a way that reflects the different “thought image” that each of the verbs generates. *Puto* means “to make clean or tidy; to prune, cut back (trees and bushes)” (*OLD* 1 and 1a), and thus, in essence, to *parse* in your mind (*OLD* 3: “to go over in the mind, ponder”). *Existimo*, meaning “to value, esteem” (*OLD* 1) is from *ex* + *aestimo*, a verb meaning “to estimate the money value of, price, value” (*OLD* 1). This verb thus fundamentally indicates the consideration of matters as an accountant would. *Delibero* (from *de* + *libra* + the suffix *-o*) is a denominative verb from the noun *libra*, meaning “a pound, a measure of weight containing 12 Roman ounces” (*OLD* 1) or “a pair of scales, balance” (*OLD* 2). So *delibero* at its core means to weigh things, as on a scale.

From this passage, then, the picture that emerges is more than just Caesar the careful planner. With these three verbs for “to think” Caesar puts in the reader's mind three distinct images – Caesar the pruner of plans into a tidy and neat form, Caesar the accountant reckoning costs and benefits, and Caesar the weigher of more and less onerous options. Moreover, the use of the imperfect tense in *putabat*, *existimabat*, and above in *tenebat* reinforces the picture of Caesar's ongoing and thorough

decision-making process.¹⁴ Whereas in 1.7.1-2 the use of the historic present tense conveys with immediacy the efficiency of Caesar's movement, the imperfect tense in 1.7.3-5 in a sense slows things down, accentuating the carefulness of Caesar's multifaceted decision-making process.¹⁵

THE FIRST ACTIONS OF THE CONSULS OF 48
– AND 49

The first passage from the *Civil War* that we will consider, 3.2, is shorter, but it exhibits many of the same qualities as the passage from the *Gallic War*. It is from the beginning of the year 48 bce, when Caesar is embroiled in war with Pompey and his other senatorial opponents. In this work that was likely intended for a contemporary readership,¹⁶ it is critical that Caesar establish for his readers the effectiveness of his work as a magistrate. In the previous chapter (3.1) he had discussed measures taken to relieve the debt crises when serving as dictator in December of 49. After describing these actions, he writes:

his rebus et feriis Latinis comitiisque omnibus perficiendis XI dies tribuit
dictaturaque se abdicat et ab urbe proficiscitur Brundisiumque pervenit.
Eo legiones XII, equitatum omnem venire iusserat. BC 3.2.1

He commits eleven days to accomplishing these things, as well as the festival of the *Feriae Latinae* and all the elections, and he resigns himself from the dictatorship and sets out from the city and arrives in Brundisium. He had ordered twelve legions and all of the cavalry to come there.

Look at all that Caesar accomplishes in one sentence! Everything up to *tribuit* describes his eleven-day dictatorship in December 49, which he then immediately puts aside with the words *dictaturaque se abdicat* (“he resigns himself from the dictatorship”). With the juxtaposition of the actions described by *tribuit* and then *abdicat*,

14 Pinkster discusses the “in progress” element of the imperfect tense, writing that “the imperfect indicative is rare with events that occur quickly.” (2015, pp. 416-422, esp. p. 422).

15 See Riggsby on Caesar's presentation of himself elsewhere in the *BC* as deliberative and capable of foresight (2006, pp. 192-195).

16 Boatwright (1988), Raaflaub (2009, pp. 180-182) and Grillo (2012, pp. 178-179) present the argument that Caesar wrote the *BC* while at war, but that it ultimately was published posthumously.

Caesar gives the clear impression that the dictatorship was held only to achieve necessary business; and the gerundive *perficiendis*, which agrees with all that precedes it in the sentence, concisely captures the thoroughness of his work in that office. Then, in the same sentence, he sets out (*profiscitur*) from the city as consul and immediately arrives (*peruenit*) in Brundisium. As at *BG* 1.7.1, the use of the historic present in the rapid-fire series of verbs *tribuit*, *abdicit*, *profiscitur*, and *peruenit* conveys swiftness and economy of action; and the crisp, concluding *peruenit* again punctuates the efficiency of Caesar's movement towards his destination. And as at *BG* 1.7.1, Caesar's effectiveness as a leader is underscored by his use of the pluperfect form *iusserat* in the next sentence: once he arrives in Brundisium, we learn of yet another effort of his – the gathering of legions and cavalry – which he had *already ordered* and set in motion.

The consul of 48 was a man of authoritative and efficient action. His merits come into even clearer focus when we look at *BC* 3.2.1 alongside Caesar's introduction of one of the consuls from the previous year, Lucius Cornelius Lentulus Crus, in the opening chapter of the *Civil War*. Here Caesar is presenting the dramatic sequence of events in January 49.¹⁷ He begins by mentioning the letter he had sent from Gaul to the senate in Rome (1.1.1). He then goes on to write:

(2) Referunt consules de re publica infinite. L. Lentulus consul senatui rei publicae se non defuturum pollicetur, si audacter ac fortiter sententias dicere velint; (3) sin Caesarem respiciant atque eius gratiam sequantur, ut superioribus fecerint temporibus, se sibi consilium capturum neque senatus auctoritati obtemperatum: habere se quoque ad Caesaris gratiam atque amicitiam receptum. *BC* 1.1.2–3

The consuls take up the matter of the republic in general. Lucius Lentulus the consul promises the senate that he will not fail the republic, if [the senators] are willing to make statements with boldness and strength; (3) but if they look to Caesar and pursue his favor, as they have done on earlier occasions, he will take up a plan for himself and will not comply with the authority of the senate: he too has a place of refuge in the favor and friendship of Caesar.

¹⁷ Ruebel provides helpful historical commentary on this passage (1994, pp. 45–46).

The Lentulus whom Caesar crafts in this passage is no man of action, but one of words, promises (*pollicetur*). And his promise to defend the republic is contingent upon *others'* willingness to speak boldly and strongly against Caesar. If they do not, his promise is that he will seize a plan for himself (*sibi consilium capturum*) and show no temperance or moderation (*obtemperaturum*) with the senate. I have printed the text from the most recent critical edition of the *Civil War*, edited by Cynthia Damon. But some earlier editors printed *incitat* instead of *infinite* and *senatum* instead of *senatum*, with a semicolon inserted after *senatui*.¹⁸ The resulting sentence reads: *incitat* ℒ. *Lentulus consul senatum; rei publicae se non defuturum pollicetur* (“Lucius Lentulus the consul incites the senate; he promises that he will not fail the republic . . .”). If we follow this text, Lentulus’ first action in this passage – and in the *Civil War* – is to incite or strong-arm (*incitat*) his senatorial colleagues. Whether or not we accept *incitat* here, the consul of 49 in Caesar’s telling does not cut an impressive figure: he is simultaneously pushy and capricious, a bully who in fact relies on others’ initiative, a self-styled leader whose only concern is self-preservation.¹⁹

When we arrive at Book 3 and the next year, and we come in 3.2.1 to Caesar’s consulship, we find not a man of bluster, bullying, and shaky promises, but one of efficient action (recall especially *perficiendis*, *pervenit*, and *iusserat*); not a consul looking out for himself, but one tending to the matters of the state (recall again the phrase from *his* to *perficiendis*, as well as the four verbs of decisive action that follow – *tribuit*, *abdicat*, *proficiscitur*, and *pervenit*). We find not one who might take refuge in the leadership of Caesar, but Caesar himself.

In the case of Lentulus as in the cases of the figure Caesar and countless others in the *commentarii*, Caesar the *auctor* reveals character at the level of the verb. Above I recapped some of the assessments by Caesar’s contemporaries of his *elegantia* or selectiveness as an author. I conclude now with perhaps the most celebrated and oft quoted ancient description of the *commentarii*. In the *Brutus*, following the interlocutors’ discussion of Caesar’s oratory, Cicero responds to Brutus’ praise of the *commentarii* by stating: *valde quidem, inquam, probandos; nudi enim sunt, recti et venusti, omni ornatu orationis tamquam veste detracta* (*Brutus* 262: “They are indeed very praiseworthy. For they are naked, upright, and charming, with all oratorical decorations removed, just as a garment”). In unforgettable language Cicero personifies Caesar’s *commentarii*, and as naked (*nudi*), with their clothes stripped off (*tam-*

¹⁸ See the texts of Fabre (1941) and Kraner and Hofmann (1959), with the discussion by Damon (2015b, p. 123). The manuscripts read *in civitate* where editors have provided *infinite* or *incitat*.

¹⁹ See further Batstone and Damon on Caesar’s “devastating” portrayal of Lentulus (2006, p. 44).

quam veste detracta).²⁰ This striking image speaks to the lack of ornament of Caesar's writing, but at the same time it may capture how *revealing* the *Gallic War* and *Civil War* are. In their nakedness, the *commentarii* bare all. To push this further, we might extend this characterization of the works as a whole to Caesar's choice and use of verbs. The ostensibly simple, stripped down, "everyday" verbs in the *commentarii*, as we have seen, show and expose much about the characters they describe. In Caesar's stylistic treatment, the verbs make – and reveal – the man.

20 See the discussion by Kraus, who suggests the translation of *nudi . . . recti et venusti* as "nude, erect, and sexy" (2005, pp. 111–112, esp. p. 112). Kraus goes on to note the applicability of such terms to Caesar the man.

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