

THE PREFACES OF SALLUST AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF DISILLUSIONMENT

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Sallust falls into place in a recognisable tradition of historiography, linking Thucydides and Tacitus. He belongs to the company of searching and subversive writers, preoccupied with power and the play of chance in human affairs, finding their delectation in disillusionment.¹

Sir Ronald Syme recognised the shared identity of Thucydides, Sallust and Tacitus as historians of disillusionment. This extends beyond matters of style. They present accounts of worlds gone wrong. Thucydides portrays the upheaval caused by the Peloponnesian War. This disrupts Greece and results in the fall of Athens. Writing during the fading years of the Roman Republic, Sallust finds inspiration in Thucydides.² The corruption of public life means that history represents an important form of service to the state. These themes resonate with Tacitus. He observes that the Principate retains the traditional forms of the Republic, but this is only a façade. In this way, Sallust serves as a bridge between Thucydides and Tacitus.³ What is the place of disillusionment in the prefaces of Sallust? What links are apparent between his prefaces and those of Thucydides and Tacitus? What other resonances can we detect between these texts?

According to Jerome, Gaius Sallustius Crispus (Sallust) was born at Amiternum in 86 BCE (*Chron.* 151H). He built an impressive career during the closing stages of the Republic. It seems that his Sabine family had not held office in Rome, so he would have attached himself to a great house to gain advancement. Asconius describes his tribunate (52 BCE) in which he opposed Cicero and Milo (37, 44-5, 49). Cassius Dio records that Sallust was expelled from the Senate on the grounds of immorality (40.63.4). This was probably a political tactic. During the civil war he allied himself with Julius Caesar. Sallust was praetor in 46 and campaigned in Africa. He was rewarded with the position of proconsular governor of *Africa Nova* (*B. Afr.* 97). Sallust was later charged with corruption and extortion (Cassius Dio 43.9.2-3). In retirement, he wrote two monographs: *The War with Catiline* and *The War against Jugurtha*.⁴ He also produced an annalistic history of Rome from 78 BCE.⁵

The prefaces of the monographs exhibit considerable structural complexity. The prologue of *The War with Catiline* occupies five chapters. It begins with a philosophical discussion that provides the context for the decision by Sallust to take up history (1.1-4.2). Next follows a defence of the subject matter (4.3-4.4). The final part of the prologue signals the plan to precede the main narrative with an evaluation of the character of Catiline (4.5). This marks the

1 Syme (1964), 256.

2 The style and content of Sallust display many influences, but the impact of Thucydides is extensive; see Scanlon (1980). On Herodotus and Sallust, see Grethelein (2006). On Cato and Sallust, see Levéne (2000). Antipater and Rutilius Rufus provide structural exemplars. Sallust continues Cornelius Sisenna in *The Histories*. For discussion of these influences see Goodyear (1982), 269f.

3 Parker (2008) highlights the foundational research of Robolski (1881) on the stylistic debt of Sallust to Thucydides. He also notes the pioneering work of Schönfeld (1884) on links between Sallust and Tacitus.

4 Translation used is Rolfe (1931).

5 Translation used is McGushin (1992).

THE PREFACES OF SALLUST

end of the formal preface, but Sallust continues to present introductory material.⁶ The initial portrait of Catiline enables Sallust to illustrate the degeneracy that dominates contemporary Rome (5.1-8).⁷ The introductory material closes with an *excursus* on Roman history (6-13). The preface of *The War with Jugurtha* also contains a series of sections.⁸ It opens with a reflection on the mind and achievement (1). Sallust underscores the enduring nature of intellectual accomplishment (2). He stresses the undesirability of public office in current times (3) and reflects on the value of the historian to the state (4.1-4). He turns to the moral degeneracy of his contemporaries (4.5-9) before setting out his subject (5). The main narrative, however, does not begin here. Instead, the text contains a second proem (5.1-3). This examines events in Africa. It is only then that Sallust turns to the prehistory of the conflict.

In his last work, Sallust abandoned the monograph in favour of annalistic history. Patrick McGushin holds that the opening of the text is in three sections.⁹ The initial part is a personal preface (frags.1-7). The first sentence is in the annalistic formula: ‘I have compiled the military and civil history of the Roman people for the consular year of Marcus Lepidus and Quintus Catulus, and for the years thereafter.’ Sallust places his work within the context of Roman historiography by evaluating earlier writers (2-4). He turns to the purpose of his work (5-6), before claiming freedom from bias (7). The second part of the opening offers an overview of Roman history (8-15). Sallust presents a Rome that achieves freedom and glory, but the defeat of Carthage causes decay. The third section deals with the period immediately preceding that of the main subject (16-46). He discusses the Social War (16-20) and subsequent turmoil (21-46). The main narrative begins with the revolt of Lepidus.

How does Sallust perceive the task of the historian? Sallust recalls that Romans were once inspired by the past: ‘I have often heard that Quintus Maximus, Publius Scipio, and other eminent men of our country, were in the habit of declaring that their hearts were set mightily aflame for the pursuit of virtue whenever they gazed upon the masks of their ancestors’ (*BJ* 4.5). Sallust suggests that it is the task of the historian to foster the pursuit of *uirtus*.¹⁰ History derives its utility from this function. This implies hope for the state. Perhaps the disenchantment of Sallust is not complete.¹¹ Thucydides affirms the utility of history (1.22.4); Tacitus notes its exemplary function (*Ann.* 2.73; 3.5). Despite this, neither historian offers much cause for confidence in the capacity of individuals to improve the present by learning from the past. Sallust also offers a disillusioned perspective: ‘But in these degenerate days, on the contrary, who is there that does not vie with his ancestors in riches and extravagance rather than in uprightness and diligence? Even the “new men”, who in former times always relied upon worth to outdo the nobles, now make their way to power and distinction by intrigue and open fraud rather than by noble practices’ (*BJ* 4.7).¹² Sallustian history is not composed of uncritical tales of exemplary Romans; instead, it is a product of the estrangement of the historian from public life.¹³

6 McGushin (1977), 291; cf. Leeman, (1954). For further views see Vretska (1937); Büchner (1960).

7 Earl (1961), 85f.; Syme (1964), 65f.

8 Leeman (1955).

9 McGushin (1992), 64.

10 Earl (1961), 18-40. For an exploration of the role of *uirtus* in Roman political life, see Eisenhut (1973). The Sallustian understanding of *uirtus* is best expressed in the speech by Marius (*BJ* 85).

Marius fails to embody the sentiments that he expresses; see Kraus and Woodman (1997), 42 n.11.

11 Scanlon (1987), 12.

12 This is a Thucydidean generalisation; see Scanlon (1980), 140f.

13 Mellor (1999), 32-35.

In his paper on Thucydides, Syme observed that ‘exile may be the making of an historian’.¹⁴ Estrangement from public life enables Sallust to pursue history: ‘When my mind found peace after many troubles and perils and I had determined that I must pass what was left of my life aloof from public affairs, it was not my intention to waste my precious leisure in indolence and sloth, nor yet by turning to farming or the chase, to lead a life devoted to slavish employments’ (*BC* 4.1). The late republic has scarred Sallust. Alienation offers a vantage point from which to survey the past. For Thucydides, banishment from Athens (5.26) enables him to explore the Peloponnesian perspective on his subject matter. At first glance, Tacitus appears not to have been touched by exile. Instead, his career flourished under the Principate.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the *Annals* explores a system of government in which power is concentrated in the hands of one man. In the *Agricola*, Tacitus captures the Principate at its worst under Domitian: ‘For the term of fifteen years, a large space in human life, chance and change have been cutting off many among us; others, and the most energetic, have perished by the Emperor’s ferocity; while we few who remain have outlived not merely our neighbours but, so to say, ourselves; for out of our prime have been blotted fifteen years, during which young men reached old age and old men the very bounds almost of decrepitude, and all without opening their lips’ (3.2).¹⁶ This is a metaphorical, yet powerful, form of exile.

The disenchantment that drives Sallust takes a distinctive form: the historian responds to decay in the body politic. In *The War with Catiline*, Sallust asserts that the Roman character declined after the defeat of Carthage: ‘Those who had found it easy to bear hardship and dangers, anxiety and adversity, found leisure and wealth, desirable under other circumstances, a burden and a curse. Hence the lust for money first, then for power, grew upon them; these were, I may say, the root of all evils’ (10.2-3). *The War with Jugurtha* offers a similarly bleak perspective (41.2-3). For Sallust, the malaise of the Republic began with Roman supremacy in the Mediterranean.¹⁷ This process of decline continues to work its destructive effects over time. In his final work, he notes the role of hypocrisy in this decay: ‘Once the fear of the Carthaginians was removed the way was clear for the exercise of political feuds. Frequent riots, party strife, and finally civil wars broke out, during which a few powerful men, to whose influential position most people had lent their support, were attempting to win absolute rule masquerading as champions of the senate or of the people’ (1.12). The end of the Carthaginian threat creates a Rome in which hypocrisy thrives. Such sentiments resemble those of Thucydides on Athens (2.65).¹⁸ Thucydides presents a vision of the past in which disaster causes decline. In Sallust, however, it is victory that undermines Rome.¹⁹ The parallel be-

14 Syme (1991), 73; cf. Dillory (2007).

15 Birley (2000).

16 Translation used is Hutton (1970).

17 The belief that unchecked supremacy gives rise to decay was widely held in antiquity; see Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* (3.1.26); Plato, *Laws* (3.698B); Aristotle, *Politics* (7.1334a-b). In his debate with Cato the Elder, Scipio Nasica asserted that Carthage should be preserved as confrontation with such as adversary maintained Roman character (Florus 1.31.5); see Earl (1961), 47. On *virtus* and antithesis, see Batstone (1988).

18 Scanlon (1980), 214: ‘For Sallust, Rome after the fall of Carthage resembled Athens during the Peloponnesian War in the exercise of imperialistic power, the vicissitudes of civil war, the need for leadership, and the behaviour of human nature.’

19 Nichols (1999), 332: ‘Thucydides documents how catastrophic events of human (war, sedition) or natural (plague) origin may produce a decline from greatness (or even prosperity) that is material and moral. Sallust, on the other hand, finds that immoderate greatness (i.e., the removal of the *metus hostilis*, *BC* 10, *BJ* 41) led to the decline of virtue and inevitably to catastrophic events (sedition and civil war). That is, “first principle” and “conclusion” appear in the reverse order.’

tween Sallust and Tacitus is also striking. Just as Sallust states that usurpers pretend to defend the state, so does Tacitus argue that the Principate cloaks itself in the forms of the Republic (1.3.7). Thus, the works of Sallust draw on Thucydides and shape the perspective of Tacitus. All three historians present visions of decay.

In grappling with this subject matter, the historian faces literary and political challenges. Sallust notes this in *The War with Catiline*: ‘I regard the writing of history as one of the most difficult of tasks: first, because the style and diction must be equal to the deeds recorded; and in the second place, because such criticisms as you make of others’ shortcomings are thought by most men to be due to malice and envy’ (3.2). Sallust links his claim of impartiality to the end of his public career: ‘I resolved to return to a cherished purpose from which ill-starred ambition has diverted me, and write a history of the Roman people, selecting such portions as seemed to me worthy of record; and I was confirmed in this resolution by the fact that my mind was free from hope, and fear, and partisanship’ (4.2). Estrangement from political life allows the historian to claim impartiality.²⁰ No such statement is contained in *The War with Jugurtha*; its non-contemporary nature meant that the author was disinterested.²¹ On the other hand, the contemporary nature of the *Histories* demands a defence against possible charges of bias. Sallust denies that his support of Caesar will undermine the integrity of the work: ‘Nor has the fact that I fought on a different side in a civil war diverted me from the truth’ (1.7). Sallust claims a vantage point that is above personal interests.

Such claims were a common *topos* of historical writing in antiquity, but this is more than mere convention in Thucydides, Sallust and Tacitus. Homer provides the basic model for impartiality. The Homeric narrator displays sympathy for both Trojans and Greeks. The narrative is not disrupted by commentary on the behaviour of characters, but judgements occur in subtle ways.²² Thucydides adopts this model. Moral judgements tend not to obstruct the work. Instead, he uses narrative to express his disenchantment. For Sallust, moral *exempla* are important; he is more inclined to comment on individuals. The authority of these judgements requires freedom from bias. By the time of Tacitus, however, it is necessary to claim impartiality for non-contemporary works such as the *Annals* (1.1.3); his rejection of historiography after Livy and his focus on the Principate lead Tacitus to assert independence.²³ For all three historians, the claim to freedom from bias reveals much about their representation of the past.

The critical perspective of Sallust shapes the way in which he treats the work of other historians. He demonstrates the rigorous analysis vital to critical history in his searching treatment of historiography: ‘The acts of the Athenians, in my judgement, were indeed great and glorious enough, but nevertheless somewhat less important than fame represents them. But because Athens produced writers of exceptional talent, the exploits of the men of Athens are heralded throughout the world as unsurpassed’ (BC 8.2-3). Sallust draws on Cato the Elder (19-20J) to observe that Roman deeds have not benefitted from similar treatment (8.5). In *The War with Jugurtha*, Sallust comments on the treatment of Sulla by Sisenna: ‘Lucius Sisenna, whose account of him is altogether the best and most careful, has not, in my opinion spoken

20 Woodman (1988), 73f.

21 Luce (1989), 28.

22 Booth (1983), 3-6; de Jong (1987).

23 Marincola (1997), 167: ‘Tacitus continues the trend that we have seen in Sallust that depicts the difficulty of history as a spirit of independence and a freedom from bias, and sees the ideal historian as one not beholden to the interests of those in power. Tacitus’ stronger and more extended defence was necessitated by what he wished to portray as the utter debasement of historiography between Livy and himself.’

with sufficient frankness' (95.2). Sallust also engages with his predecessors in the *Histories*. He praises the brevity of Cato and the veracity of Fannius (1.3). The fragmentary nature of the text makes it hard to determine the correct structure of the preface, but Sallust seems to turn to Sisenna at this point.²⁴ He is the object of both praise and criticism. Although Sallust continues the work of Sisenna, he does not approach this task with diffidence. Instead, Sallust establishes a position for himself: 'I, in so great an abundance of very learned men...' (1.5).

Thucydides presents Sallust with a model of critical engagement with rival works.²⁵ Although he refrains from naming Herodotus, Thucydides takes issue with him on two points concerning Sparta (1.20.3). He then turns his attention to less worthy rivals, underscoring the inferiority of their research and rejecting them as nothing more than storytellers (1.21.1).²⁶ This kind of critical approach is not confined to Thucydides and Sallust; Tacitus also takes issue with the work of his predecessors. In the preface of the *Annals*, Tacitus observes that the Republic and Augustus were documented by talented writers. Under the Principate, however, the quality of historiography declines. Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero evoked fear in life and hatred in death (1.1.2). The result is poor history writing. Tacitus sets himself the task of addressing this deficiency.

The critical vision of Sallust is also evident in the overview of Roman history that he presents in *The War with Catiline*: 'Since the occasion has arisen to speak of the morals of our country, the nature of my theme seems to suggest that I go farther back and give a brief account of the institutions of our forefathers in peace and in war, how they governed the commonwealth, how great it was when they bequeathed it to us, and how by gradual changes it has ceased to be the noblest and best, and has become the worst and most vicious' (5.9). Sallust proceeds to offer a digression on the history of Rome from its beginnings to his own times. This approach imitates Thucydides.²⁷ In the first half of the digression, Sallust charts the rise of Rome (6-19). The foundation and development of Rome are products of unity.²⁸ When prosperity makes the city a target of conquest, the bonds of mutual support between Romans preserve their independence (6.5). Liberty offers citizens the opportunity to pursue *virtus*. This strengthens the state (7.1-3). The second half of the *excursus* (10-13) is the antithesis of the first. With Carthage defeated, Rome is consumed by avarice and thirst for power (10.5). The actions of Catiline are symptomatic of this decline. In fact, the historian presents decay as an epidemic: 'At first these vices grew slowly, from time to time they were punished; finally, when the disease had spread like a deadly plague, the state was changed and a government second to none in equity and excellence became cruel and intolerable' (10.6). This recalls the representation of the plague and its moral impact by Thucydides.²⁹ The state has become diseased. Tacitus offers a similarly disenchanted view of Rome under the Principate. For example, the Roman people offer no opposition to Augustus as he consolidates his

24 McGushin (1992), 70f.

25 Whitehouse (2007), 16f.

26 Connor (1984), 28 and 66 n.37.

27 Kraus and Woodman (1997), 45 n.71: 'It is possible that in thus selecting several beginnings he is imitating Polybius, whose "main" history begins in 220 BC (1.3.2, 4.2.1) but who identifies other starting points at 387/6 (the beginning of Roman naval power: 1.6, 1.12) and 264-60 (the first time the Romans crossed by sea from Italy: 1.5). Both writers are ultimately influenced by the Thucydidean pattern of archaeology + brief history of the immediate past (the *pentecontaetia*) + main narrative'; see also Feeney (1994), 139-46.

28 The Trojans and Aborigines are antithetical in a range of ways, yet combine to form a united Rome; see Wilkins (1994), 19.

29 Sallust also uses this image at BC 36.5 and BJ 32.4; see McGushin (1977), 67.

THE PREFACES OF SALLUST

power: ‘the most defiant had fallen in the battle line or by proscription and the rest of the nobles, each in proportion to his readiness for servitude, were being exalted by wealth and honours and, enhanced by the revolution, preferred the protection of the present to the perils of old’ (1.2.1).³⁰

Historians of disillusionment reveal flaws in human nature. In his final work, Sallust begins his historical overview with an exploration of civil conflict: ‘The first quarrels arose among us through a defect of human nature which, restless and unbridled, is always immersed in struggles for liberty or for glory or for power’ (1.8). Such behaviour is as destructive as it is self-serving. Sallust derives this interest in human nature from Thucydides. The Greek historian sets out his view in his discussion of the upheaval in Corcyra: ‘At this crisis, when the life of the city had been thrown into utter confusion, human nature, now triumphant over the laws, and accustomed even in spite of the laws to do wrong, took delight in showing that its passions were ungovernable, that it was stronger than justice and an enemy to all superiority’ (3.84.2).³¹ In this way, self-interest triumphs over the common good.³² For Thucydides, war dispels the illusions that mask human nature: ‘For in peace and prosperity both states and individuals have gentler feelings, because men are not then forced to face conditions of dire necessity; but war, which robs men of the easy supply of their daily wants, is a rough schoolmaster and creates in most people a temper that matches their condition’ (3.82.2). The unbridled pursuit of self-interest has devastating consequences for Greece. Furthermore, self-interest has damaging effects for Rome with the rise of Augustus. The Roman mindset of Tacitus leads him to focus on the use of political institutions.³³ Human nature is revealed through the purposes to which these institutions are put. In the *Histories*, Tacitus argues that lust for power is part of human nature (2.38). The historian develops this perspective in the *Annals*. Republican forms remain, yet they now serve the interests of the Princeps. Moreover, Augustus uses the pursuit of self-interest by Romans to serve his own ends. The people are fed. Soldiers receive gifts. The nobility are lured by promises of wealth and advancement. Moral bankruptcy also prevails in the provinces (1.2). Rome is becalmed by self-interest.

The relationship between language and power interests all three historians of disenchantment.³⁴ Language is the fabric of which illusion is made. For Sallust, words have lost their meaning in the Republic. This is an intrinsic feature of decay: ‘Ambition drove many men to become false; to have one thought locked in the breast, another ready on the tongue; to value friendships and enmities not on their merits but by the standard of self-interest, and to show a good front rather than a good heart’ (BC 10.5). In *The War with Jugurtha*, Sallust observes that magistracies have come to signify honour irrespective of merit (4.8). He builds on these ideas in his final work: ‘The terms “good” and “bad” were applied to citizens, not on the yardstick of services rendered or injuries inflicted on the state, since all were equally corrupt; any individual of outstanding wealth and irresistible in his lawlessness was considered “good” because he was a preserver of existing conditions’ (1.12). This debasement of language is

30 The translation used is Woodman (2004).

31 The translation used is Smith (1930).

32 The leadership of Pericles embodies the subordination of self-interest to the needs of the state. This is exemplified through his offer to yield his farm to Athens and thus avoid the divisions that might arise if the Spartans spare his lands (2.13.1). On the conflict between public and private interest in Book 2, see Connor (1984), 52-78.

33 Morford (1991).

34 O’Gorman (2000), 3.

both a cause and product of the corruption of civic life. The values that defined Rome have dissolved into meaninglessness.

Thucydides also concerns himself with the disjunction between word and deed.³⁵ In his preface, he claims that the Peloponnesian War was the worst upheaval in Greek history (1.1.2). Later, it is revealed that the disruption generated by the war encompasses language itself. The crisis at Corcyra leads him to reflect on this phenomenon: ‘The ordinary acceptation of words in their relation to things was changed as men thought fit. Reckless audacity came to be regarded as courageous loyalty to party, prudent hesitation as specious cowardice, moderation as a cloak for unmanly weakness, and to be clever in everything was to do naught in anything’ (3.82.4). In the context of imperial Rome, Tacitus demonstrates a similar concern. For example, this is evident in the first line of the *Annals*. Under the Republic *libertas et consulatus* are synonymous, yet Tacitus expresses them as a doublet. By the end of the book (1.81.2) it is clear that the consulship no longer protects liberty.³⁶ This type of analysis defines the work of the historian of disillusionment. Dissatisfied with appearances, and keenly aware of the power of language, Thucydides, Sallust and Tacitus strive to expose the reality behind the façade. This is a powerful, compelling and distinctive form of history.

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35 Scanlon (1980), 79-82; Price (2001), 39-78.

36 Kraus and Woodman (1997), 94.

THE PREFACES OF SALLUST

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