

Libido Dominandi: Nietzsche and Sallust

By Nicholas Birns

Why Nietzsche and Sallust? Why such an unlikely pairing of the nineteenth-century German astonishment and the first century BC Latin chronicler? They are not even antagonists. Nietzsche and St. Paul, or Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, or even Nietzsche and Leibniz, yes, there is the stuff of contest, of opposition. But of Nietzsche and Sallust, what is the relation? How could a world-defying iconoclast have anything in common with a historian who dutifully recorded events to us now long ago?

Yet, as those who know, know, Nietzsche lauded Sallust to the skies, saying that the first century BC Roman historian may be one of the few writers he actually admires. A close look at the text of *Twilight of the Idols* is warranted here:

My taste, which may be the opposite of a tolerant taste, is in this case too far from saying Yes indiscriminately; it does like to say Yes; rather even No; but best of all nothing. That applies to whole cultures, it applies to books — also to places and landscapes. At bottom it is a very small number of ancient books that counts in my life; the most famous are not among them. My sense of style, was awakened when I came into contact with Sallust. I have not forgotten the surprise of my honored teacher, Corssen, when he had to give his worst Latin pupil the best grade: I had finished with one stroke, compact, sever, with as much substance as possible, a cold sarcasm against “beautiful words” and “beautiful sentiments” — here I found myself. And even in my *Zarathustra* one will recognize a very serious ambition for a Roman style, for the *aere perennius* in style.

Nietzsche says he is not voraciously curious, not open to everything the opposite of the famous credo of a slightly earlier Latin writer than Sallust, the African-born playwright Terence, who famously said, *humani nil a me alienum puto*. Nothing human is alien to him; Nietzsche makes clear that much that is human is. As a reader, Nietzsche freely takes on the danger of what Voltaire satirized in *Candide* in the character of Pococurante—somebody who dismisses most of extant literature because it is not good enough for him, and avoids many standard authors not out of ignorance or boorishness but out of icy, snide disdain. Nietzsche will not compromise for the sake of inclusiveness, but lets the actual dictates of his judgment call to him.

All this is true. In other words Nietzsche is not just lying or being pretentious here. But he is unquestionably being theatrical, mugging it up. He is using his genuine admiration for Sallust to shake up and shock others. This begins with his first reading of the historian, which at the time while he was in secondary school at Schulpforta studying under Wilhelm Corssen—who was a great advocate for Nietzsche, yet knew his extraordinary pupil preferred Greek to Latin, vaulted Nietzsche's own style into a sphere his teacher might not have expected. Sallust's style, "Gedrängt, streng," wound as tight as possible among words as can be, gave Nietzsche's own Latin a pulse, an intent: removed it from student mediocrity, from the burden of just trying to be correct. Sallust gave Nietzsche's Latin, so he says an edge.

One wonders, though, if the crusade against the "Schöne Wort" which ambiguously backdated to his Schulpforta adolescence is quite so certifiably *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. This seems rather an attribute of the later Nietzsche, the post-Wagner post *Zweites Reich* Nietzsche, the Nietzsche who deliberately rebelled against inflation and grandiosity, who saw the dreams he had earlier invested in, as in David Allison's words, "a risible spectacle of mysticism and self-

indulgence.” The retrojection of this back into the Schulpforta era—when, however much this disdain for grandiosity may have been a native tendency, it was surely accelerated after his break with Wagner and his disillusionment with the Empire—attempts to make temperamental the temporal.

This sources the fundamental paradox of Nietzsche’s interest in Sallust: that his praise is for his exacting, severe, epigrammatic style, and this affinity is in line with Nietzsche’s late praise of French epigrammatists such as La Rochefoucauld. Nietzsche knows that this claim is partially rhetorical, and done in particular to score German complacency and chauvinism. By lauding the opposite of the Wagnerian, Nietzsche makes clear his present distance from Wagner, but no reader can take his asseveration of Gallicism or Latinity or logic or concision straight, as he remains sprawling, bombastic, ambitious, and world-shaking—although in his own more ironic and subversive way. In this regard, the Sallust affinity borders on being a trope. And, even more paradoxically, Sallust is a historian, and this is just what he is not—he may be a philosopher, a philologist, a poet, a prophet, but not a historian.

That Nietzsche is not a historian has something to do with that the training of a classical philologist emphasizes not just philology, but poetry and philosophy, over history. History was separate spherules to be dealt with through separate scholarly techniques and, though historical knowledge was assumed as part of a philologist’s arsenal, it was not especially paraded as a part of his intellectual stock-in-trade. Moreover, in any idolatry the classics historians get short shrift. Philosophers can speak to the human condition; poets to general states of feeling, but, as Aristotle stated, history can only be about what it is about. In addition, the way the classical historian corpus was left to us makes it ill-starred for the use which later Western tradition wanted for it. If one historian had chronicled the stirring triumphs of Marathon and Salamis,

where the West defied the East, in a patriotic style redolent of that which Livy gave the Romans—yet the chronicler of these events was Herodotus, whose considerable sympathy with the Persian, Egyptians, and other non-Greeks queered the potential Eurocentric pitch. Thucydides had the Greek-centeredness and Athenian patriotism later tradition would have loved, but the story he chose to tell was of the folly of Athens and its catastrophic decline. Other Greek histories were later, derivative, and not inspirational. Roman historians had the disadvantage of writing about Rome, which, because it inaugurated a European political tradition, which, as writers from Edward Gibbon to Giorgio Agamben have realized, we are still within, could not serve as a gratifying other on which Western tradition can be founded. Moreover, much of Livy was lost, and the remainder went into too much detail to be convenient. The ancient historians have thus mostly occupied a second tier in practices of *paideia*; in freshman humanities courses, the ‘Greeks; that we are supposed to see as ‘important to us all’ are Plato and Sophocles, Aristotle and Aeschylus, but infrequently a historian.

The one exception to this—and only in Germany—is the one historian with whom, otherwise, Nietzsche might have felt a great affinity. Tacitus’s style was skeptical and severe, his values adamant but only in ironic juxtaposition to those he excoriated. If Tacitus had written only *The Annals* and *The Histories* Nietzsche might have turned to him for an example. But Tacitus also wrote *Germania*, recently described by Christopher Krebs as “the most dangerous book.” Here Tacitus lauded the ancient German peoples to the skies, intending solely for an ironic contrast to the Romans he disliked, much like Nietzsche’s own later championship of the French versus the Germans he disliked. But modern Germans took Tacitus seriously and saw Tacitus’s book as the *Ursprung* of German *Herrschaft*, the teething-time of the master race. Nietzsche could not use Tacitus.

Conversely, Sallust's two subjects—the rebellion of Jugurtha and the conspiracy of Catiline—had the advantage of not involving the Germans but of also being pre-Imperial, and Sallust himself wrote before the Roman Republic had fully congealed into Empire--unlike Tacitus, Suetonius, and even Livy himself. Moreover Sallust would have been congenial to Nietzsche because he was early and wrote about the early, something Nietzsche, who preferred Aeschylus and Sophocles to Euripides, the pre-Socratics to Plato and Aristotle, would have liked. As a reader I have long desired to make Nietzsche in my own image, to render him into a connoisseur of the *Bas-Empire*; a Huysmansian delectator of the decadent, but Friedrich Nietzsche cannot be bent that way: early he ventures, and early he is.

Sallust himself on a much more material level, encountered some of the same ambiguities Nietzsche did in his exploration of himself and his constitutive paradoxes. At the beginning of the *Conspiracy of Catiline*, Sallust tells us that what distinguishes humanity is its mental exertions; that the body's strength is but a tool wielded by the mind, and that the mind uses the body to gain a worthwhile celebrity and recognition in light of the community's regard. Sallust confesses that he wished this for himself politically; but this was not to be the case. Thus he repaired to history, not to use history to settle old scores or win the struggles on the page he could not in the arena of life, but to attempt, disinterestedly, to exercise his mental agility to cause great works. He aspired to write the while of Roman history but only in detached episodes: more like, to use the musical analogy, tone poems than movements in a symphony. And, with his determination to be meticulous, accurate, and stylistically ingenious, it was inevitable that, turning to history comparatively late in his short, fifty-year lifespan, he only completed these two panels.

Both concentrated pieces that remain are about single individuals who are outsiders. One is Jugurtha, an African Berber king, the illegitimate grandson of Rome's great Punic War-era African client Masinissa, who turned against Rome with venom and fury. The other is the conspiracy of Catiline, the opportunistic, distressed-aristocrat-turned-schemer who attempted to seize power by means of trickery and demagoguery in mid-first century BC Rome.

In both books, Sallust's sympathies are on the side of the established Roman order. He had good reason to be: he was a (minor) member of Julius Caesar's political tendency, and when he writes about Gaius Marius, Caesar's great political patron, in *Jugurtha* he is lauding his patron's patron. Similarly, the Catiline conspiracy occurred while Sallust was still trying to make a political career, and he, like all Romans of eminence, was dead-set against it; the drama in Sallust's narrative is the different responses and reactions to Catiline of those great Romans (Caesar, Cato, Cicero) who are all unanimously against Catiline. Indeed, if present-day terms can be applied to so long ago, Catiline was seen as a "left-wing" figure by the Roman establishment and so to be spurned. When I was in college, an elderly professor would come to every talk sponsored by the institution's center for the humanities, and, in the question and answer period, label some tendency he did not like as "Catilinarian," pronounced in five syllables, CAT-lin-ARE-e-an. Any phenomenon queer, feminist, deconstructive, Marxist, or indeed, I suspected, anything at all non-time-honored like breakfast tacos or salad as a main course, would be in this old sage's eyes "Catilinarian." Sallust's own description of the conspirator, while less easy to extrapolate, is not far off: a left-wing schemer whose rise is a bad omen for a society whose integrity is on the wane.

And yet, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Jugurtha and Catiline are unquestionably the protagonists of their books; they have the energy, the *éclat*, the magnitude, and the charisma,

what Sallust, assessing the now-dead Catiline, calls his ‘fierceness of spirit’. . Moreover, both protagonists seek in the political arena what Sallust once did, and which he now seeks in the historical one: the exercise of *libido dominandi*, or will-to-dominate. They are using their minds to compel bodies to action. This in turn is much like Nietzsche’s own will-to-power, as found in *Zarathustra*, which Laurence Lampert describes as that which is the goal of “the highest of beings.” *Zarathustra*, as a countercultural anti-prophet, is doing on the much more abstract level what Jugurtha and Catiline, Sallust’s villains, were doing: trying to found a new order by upending the old, and trying to seize the moment for a new style of mental leadership. Sallust, indeed, even in overt terms, is anti-aristocratic, moving the populist Marius over his aristocratic rival Sulla; thus Nietzsche’s love for Sallust puts him in the odd position of being bedfellows with a populist, far from both the natural and social aristocracy Nietzsche rightly glimpsed in La Rochefoucauld, a stylist he lauds for similar reasons. The condition of both Sallust and Nietzsche cannot be harnessed in one definition but spills over into self-contradiction and self-exposure—all relayed in a lucid, epigrammatic style that may pinpoint, but cannot reduce, the complexity it describes. Nietzsche, while respecting Sallust’s historical orientation, takes the historian away from history itself, lauds his mental agility and intellectual sprightliness because it guides the spirit towards the ability to “exercise power over time and liberate it from the past “ as Paul Loeb so aptly notes is urged in *Zarathustra*. Like Nietzsche, Sallust sees his society at a point of crisis, where, as Sallust laments, avarice is replacing ambition, and desire to genuine glory fades in favor of mere accumulation of funds.

The genealogy of Sallust’s *libido dominandi* and Nietzsche’s will-to-power, though, is not disintermediate; as is well-known, Augustine’s’ appropriation, in *The City of God*, of Sallust’s will to dominate to anatomize the human tendency to strive through sin, the self-

propagating desire of the City of Man. Yet Augustine in dividing cities of man and God cleanly, did not see that cultural institutions such as the church could take on an inappropriate *libido dominandi*. Nor, due to their historical moments and thought-systems, did either Sallust or Augustine adequately discuss the idea of empire, and the more abstract questions of whether state mechanisms, and not just individuals, could malevolently embody the *Libido dominandi*. Nietzsche in his own day added to this congeries the idea of not just a state mechanism, but also a cultural hegemony—the self-gratified complacency of the German people after unification and Empire—embaying a collective libido dominandi. It is against this collective libido dominandi that he sets this own individual will, a mind actively exerting the body, closer to Sallust and, even in sinful guise, Augustine's, then what he saw about him as a mature adult—and not, we may trust, whatever his schoolboy clairvoyance or percipience, at Schulpforta.

Nietzsche looks in Sallust for an epistemology that sees what is in front of one's nose, but has the grace to accept its own embedding in paradox and self-exposure. At the close of his passage of Sallust in *Gotterdammerung*, Nietzsche speaks of Sallust as helping him approach an *aere perrenius* in style-. This reference to Horace who Nietzsche mentions immediately after his citation of Sallust, and whose style has long won accolades for modesty and straightforwardness similar to Sallust---even that which we, informed by a later idea of Romanitas might label catholicity. But it is catholicity beyond cultural consensus: one exercise by supreme individual will, and wrought out of words.