Beginning Sallust’s Catiline

‘The prooemia of Sallust’s three works’, observes F.R.D. Goodyear, ‘... have engendered endless debate’,¹ and a person contributing yet another pebble to the pile may well feel obliged to defend his action. My first justification is the wish to honour Patrick Lacey with an essay on an author whom I first read with him. After twenty years I retain a vivid memory of the relish with which he communicated Sallust’s energy and wit to a group of undergraduates who were picking their way through W.C. Summers’ old Pitt Press edition at a speed that (as I can see in hindsight) he must have found rather exasperating. My other justification is the conviction that very few people read the opening of the Catiline with the assumption that Sallust is fully in control of his material.² The criticisms of the monograph’s beginning are notorious, and they are usually said to reach back to Quintilian’s comment that C. Sallustius in bello lugurthino et Catilinae nihil ad historiam pertinentibus principiis orsus est (‘Sallust in the Jugurtha and Catiline started with prooemia not at all relevant to the genre of history’, 3.8.9). While Quintilian seems to be observing (without necessarily criticising) a formal departure from conventional historical beginnings,³ modern scholars concentrate on the prefaces’

¹ CHCL Vol.2, 270.
² Syme, of course, being the exception: ‘He knows what he is trying to do, he dominates the subject’, Sallust (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964) 67; cf. A.J. Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies (London and Sydney, 1988) 120-4, on the first paragraph, esp. 122 on how Sallust puts ‘an idea into the reader’s mind only to return to it later’, a technique which ‘occurs frequently in the preface and constitutes one of the subtleties of Sallust’s style’.
³ D.C. Earl, The Political Thought of Sallust (Amsterdam, 1966) 5; id., ‘Prologue-form in ancient historiography’ANRW 1.2.842—56, arguing that Sallust has opened the work as if it were a philosophical treatise.
supposed intellectual confusion and structural incompetence. Two pages of Goodyear’s essay offer ‘disproportionate bulk’, ‘a texture of loosely related themes’, ‘a little ramshackle’, ‘the thought is not worked out’. If commentators seem satisfied that we are not observing a great thinker at work, let us see if perhaps we may discover a great artist at work. The opening of the Catiline has been subjected to earnest and moral readings; what is offered here might be termed, antithetically, an ironic and literary reading.

We go through two pages of general discussion about gloria and virtus before Sallust vouchsafes that writing, and in particular writing about deeds, is his real concern (3.1). Against conventional thinking, he will have it that writing great deeds is practically as glorious as performing them. At last we have the delayed introductory phrase res gestas scribere (‘to write history’), words which are only allowed to appear once he has elaborately cleared the ground for seeing this activity as being on a par with politics. His self-consciousness about the novelty of his approach is caught especially with his strange phrase describing the difficulty of writing history, facta dictis exaequanda sunt (3.2). ‘Deeds have to be made equal to words’—an odd way of saying what his argument requires, that ‘words have to be made equal to deeds’, that the account has to live up to the event. But then making deeds equal to words—putting doing and writing on an equal footing—is exactly what he has been doing in his discussion so far.

After the phrase res gestas scribere has appeared, and its performance justified as an activity, we might expect to be told which res gestae are to be narrated for us, but a paragraph of autobiography delays us while we learn of Sallust’s reasons for turning from action to writing. We might label this as garrulity, if not for the self-reflexiveness of the language he uses when he finally returns to talk of the deferred topic of res gestae: sed a quo incepto studioque me ambitio mala detinuerat, eodem regressus statui res gestas populi Romani...perscribere (‘but returning to the

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4 Loc. cit. 270-1.

5 The appropriateness of these words as an historical beginning is shown by the sentence with which Sallust later opened his Histories: res populi Romani M. Lepito Q. Catulo consulibus ac deinde militiae et domi gestas composui.
undertaking and pursuit from which mischievous ambition had detained me, I decided to write up the history of the Roman people', 4.2). Here he comments self-referentially upon the digression represented by his autobiographical section (3.3-4.1). If ambitio mala detained him from his beginning before he decided to return to it in his life, then his little autobiographical digression about ambitio mala has done exactly the same thing within his book, detaining him from his beginning of res gestae before he decides to return to it. The regressus of his autobiography, then, does double duty for the thematic return to his programme.6

He appears, at last, to be back on track with his resumptive announcement statui res gestas populi Romani, 'I decided the history of the Roman people...'-after which splendid words we encounter the destabilising adverb carptim, 'selectively', 'in disconnected segments'. What Sallust means by this, of course, is that he will not be following the mainstream tradition of Roman historical writing, which narrated the deeds of the Roman people unselectively, from the foundation of the city down to the historian's own time.7 One explanation for the meandering movement of his beginning is to be found here, for throughout the preface he flaunts his rejection of this prestigious alternative way of recording the past, and he does so by ironically parading snippets of alternative, more imposing, beginnings. The deceptive res gestas populi Romani announcement is trumped a page further on, when he reaches back to provide a general context for Catiline's moral depravity, and delivers an imposing sentence of the kind that could have stood as the ornamental opening to a 'proper' account of the deeds of the Roman people: urbes Romam, sicuti ego accipi, condire atque habuere initio Troiani ('the city of Rome, according to my authorities, was founded and occupied in the beginning by Trojans', 6.1). The loaded word initio carries a good deal

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6 For a collection of dogged speculations about Sallust's youthful dabbling in historiography, see the commentary of Karl Vretska (Heidelberg, 1976) ad loc.

7 See T.P. Wiseman, Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature (Leicester, 1979) 18-26, on the various strands of Roman historiography before Sallust, and the dominance in the 1st century B.C. of the ab ovo annalistic approach.
of Sallust's mordant power here, since he had told us earlier that he was going to give us a character sketch of Catiline before making his *initium narrandi* (4.5), and this digressive *initio*, doing no more than providing context for that sketch, is doubly displaced from the proud beginning moment it should have been. He reinforces the point shortly thereafter, when he tells us that he could have narrated the heroic deeds of Roman military history, *ni ea res longius nos ab incepto traheret* ('except that the subject-matter would drag me too far from my undertaking', 7.7). And towards the end of the monograph, between the speeches and the comparison of Caesar and Cato, he reminds us again of the kind of history-writing which his wilful selectivity is suppressing: *sed mihi multa legenti, multa audienti quae populus Romanus domi militiaeque, mari atque terra praecella facinora fecit...* ('but as I listened to many accounts, and heard many accounts, of the splendid deeds which the Roman people performed at home and on campaign, by sea and land...', 53.2). He is reading and hearing many such accounts, but he is not writing any.

If Sallust ironically gestures towards the kind of history he is not going to begin writing, since he is writing selectively (*carpitim*), we are entitled to ask what his principle of selection will be. *Ut quaeque memoria digna uidebantur*, he tells us, 'according to how worthy the episodes appeared to be of being preserved in memory' (4.2). He then announces his particular subject, the conspiracy of Catiline, and tells us what was particularly memorable about it, namely, the novelty of the crime and the peril, *memorabile...sceleris atque periculi nouitate* (4.4). The whole business of memorability is presented by the movement of the prooemium as being inherently tautological. The historian writes about memorable things, but things become memorable by being written about by the historian. The historian suppresses as well as preserves.

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8 Tacitus, famously, does select this beginning moment for the real beginning of his *Annales*, *Urbem Romam a principio reges habuere*. He shows his understanding of Sallust's fracturing technique by combining this sentence from 6.1 with another illusory beginning earlier on in Sallust's preface, *igitur initio reges* (2.1).

9 Another twist is provided by the idea that the historian becomes memorable himself through the act of writing. The lust for glory is one of the subjects of the monograph; it is also its openly acknowledged
The historian, especially one who professes to be writing carptim, ‘selectively’, is aware of the fact that every mention of something is in effect a displacement of something else. There are indeed many omissions and silences in this apparently garrulous and meandering preface: not the glorious annals of the Roman people, but crime and evil instead; not foreign wars, but civil; not Cicero, but Catiline.10

Sallust’s most explicit comment upon the distortion of the historian’s representation comes immediately after a particularly conspicuous suppression of memoria, when he says that he could commemorate great Roman military exploits (memorare possum...) if not for the fact that such subject-matter would drag him too far from his undertaking (ni ea res longius nos ab incepto traheret, 7.7). After this spectacular smothering he delivers himself of a sentence that turns out to refer as much to historical tradition as to its ostensible subject, fortuna: sed profecto fortuna in omni re dominatur; ea res cunctas ex lubidine magis quam ex uero celebrat obscuratque (‘but fortune certainly is the reigning power in every sphere; fortune celebrates and smothers everything on the basis of whim rather than truth’, 8.1).

motivation. When memoria is first mentioned in the work it is ‘the memory of ourselves’ (memoriam nostri quam maxume longam efficere, 1.3), and praise comes both to the performers and the writers of deeds (et qui fecere et qui facta aliorum scripsere multi laudantur, 3.1). Much of this paradox can be retrospectively unpacked from a single word in the first sentence of the work, where the fate to shun is that of leading one’s life silentio - conclusively shown by Woodman to mean both ‘without being talked about’ and also ‘without saying anything’: A.J. Woodman, ‘A note on Sallust, Catilina 1.1’ CQ 23 (1973) 310; cf. R.J. Baker, ‘Sallustian silence’ Latomus 41 (1982) 801-2.

10 The monograph is a third of the way through its progress before Cicero is even mentioned, in connection with the story of the conspirators drinking human blood: nonnulli ficta et haec et multa praeterea existumabant ab eis, qui Ciceronis inuidiam, quae postea orta est, leniri credebant atrocitate sceleris eorum, qui poenas dederant (‘quite a few people thought that this and much else was made up by those who believed that the bad feeling which later arose against Cicero would be alleviated by making the crime of those who had been punished an outrageous one’, 22.3). The first time that Cicero is mentioned, then, he is under a posterior cloud of inuidia that crowds out the memory of the deed which Sallust has not even described yet.
Such is the starting-point for his marvellously ironic reflection upon the power of history (8.2-4):

Atheniensum res gestae, sicuti ego aestumo, satis amplae magnificaeque fuere, uerum aliquanto minores tamen quam fama feruntur. sed quia prouenere ibi scriptorum magna ingenia, per terrarum orbem Atheniensium facta pro maxumis celebrantur. ita eorum qui fecere uirtus tanta habetur quantum eam uerbis potuere extollere praeclara ingenia.

The deeds of the Athenians, in my opinion, were perfectly impressive and magnificent; still, they were considerably less grand than they are reported to be by popular tradition. But because historians of great genius sprang up there, the deeds of the Athenians are celebrated over the globe as if they were the greatest ever. So true is it that the estimation of the uirtus of men of action is in exact ratio with the capacity of outstanding geniuses to extoll it.

Here Sallust is looking in particular at two closely linked passages in Thucydides' discussion of the size of the Greek expedition to Troy. Thucydides argues first that Mycenae's current state is no evidence for the force it might once have mustered against Troy, and he adduces the case of Sparta and Athens, whose architectural remains after a future devastation would give a quite misleading impression of their actual former power: people would not believe that Sparta had been as great as report (κλέος) had it, and they would judge Athens' power to have been twice as great as it really was (1.10.2). Besides the physical appearance of cities, Thucydides' other case of unreliable witness is of course Homer, whose exaggeration of the Greek expedition has left a misleading impression in everybody's mind (1.11.3). These Thucydidean comments on the discrepancy between appearance and reality in the spheres of poetry and architecture have been rewritten by the Roman historian to devastating effect: Thucydides' history has itself become a monument of the past, like poetry and architecture, equally liable to be incommensurate with reality.
A further explanation for the perturbing movement of the preface is, then, to be sought in Sallust’s wish to put his own shaping and controlling power in the forefront, so as to make it impossible for the reader to be lulled into thinking that the facts are speaking for themselves. The ego of the historian, with his abrupt and wilful swerves, with his apparently capricious selection of L. Sergius Catilina out of the whole rogues’ gallery of the late Republic, calls attention to the act of will involved in imposing the pattern he wishes on the chaos and flux that presents itself to the observer of human affairs (quod si regum atque imperatorum animi virtus in pace ita ut in bello ualeret, aequabilius atque constantius sese res humanae haberent, neque aliiu alio ferri neque mutari ac misceri omnia cerneres, ‘and if the mental virtus of kings and commanders were as powerful in peace as in war, then human affairs would be more even and more regular, and you wouldn’t see things moving to and fro in different directions, with everything in a state of change and confusion’, 2.3; cf. 2.9, in magna copia rerum, ‘in the great abundance of affairs/subject-matter’).

Many apparently ‘natural’ beginnings are referred to in passing as we go through the preface: the beginning of human government (igitur initio reges..., 2.1); the beginning of Sallust’s career (sed ego adolescentulus initio..., 3.3); the birth of Catiline (L. Catilina, nobili genere natus..., 5.1); the foundation of Rome (urbem Romam..., 6.1). All are subordinated to the strenuous design imposed by the historian.

We may see this signalling of his controlling power at work when he introduces his villainous hero. His first mention of Catiline leads him into a character sketch, which is explicitly stated to be part of the preface, not the narrative (4.5). He then breaks off, claiming that he needs to provide the whole perspective of Roman achievement and decline (5.9). After this lengthy retrogression charting the inversion of Roman mores, he finally returns to Catiline in Chapter 14, picking up with more description of his nature. This pattern of organisation, by interweaving our impression of Catiline with a panorama of the

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11 Not to mention the historiographically correct announcement of the subject (igitur de Catilinae coniuratione quam uerissume potero paucis absoluam, 4.3); cf. Earl, art.cit. 846 n. 3, on this sentence and lug. 5.1: ‘These are first sentences of unimpeachable correctness; but they do not stand first in their works’.
The novelty of Catiline’s conspiracy is said by Sallust to be the reason it is particularly memorable (4.4), and it is clearly his self-consciousness concerning the novelty of his own procedure in writing about it which explains many of the apparently objectionable features of the preface: his inordinate stress on the value of writing, his oblique dismissal of traditional ways of writing about the past, his parading of his own person and intellect, both in biographical ‘digression’ and in selection and suppression of subject-matter. Nothing less would have served for the first pages of a man who was setting out to ‘conquer a new domain for the literature of the Latins’.

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12 Syme, op.cit. 1 n. 2.