

Sallust's Salient Snails

Because often in war tiny variables can have huge consequences . . .

—JULIUS CAESAR, *BELLUM CIVILE*

Ten years ago, I bought a postcard of a painted snail: side-on against a bright yellow ground, crawling from left to right (figure 9).



FIGURE 9. Postcard (detail of image in figure 10). Author's photo.

It was clearly a detail (when would a snail take up a whole picture?).¹ But I did not know at the time that it was part of a fifteenth-century Annunciation, usually attributed to Francesco del Cossa, now hanging in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden (figure 10).

Nor did I know that an interpretation of this very painting, focused specifically on the snail, French art historian Daniel Arasse's essay "Le regard de l'escargot," had just been translated as "The Snail's Gaze" in *Take a Closer Look*, a posthumous collection published by Princeton University Press (Princeton is where I bought the card).² Arasse (mentioned in the previous chapter for his iconoclastic approach to visual detail) is a chatty and disarming guide who crawls excitedly all over del Cossa's painting, knowing full well that his readers will accuse him of overinterpreting. That may be true, but what he says is eye-opening for students of artistic and literary details alike.

For a start, Arasse has no truck with traditional Warburgian iconology, according to which del Cossa's snail is merely a tactful emblem of the dewy hands-off insemination of the Virgin Mary.³ For him, by contrast, it is nothing less than an existential gauge of time, scale, and even truth. Why, otherwise, he reasons, would such a striking visual link be made between the silhouette of the snail (lower right) and the tiny flying figure of God (upper left)? It is clear that something humble and real has been put in diametric equivalence with something infinite and unreachable. Surely it must mean more than that God was simply slow to send his son to Earth?

More curious still is that, while God is small, the snail is outrageously large—even outsize, compared with the angel's foot. When Arasse went to Dresden to see the painting, he had a revelation: it is actually the snail that is life-size and the rest of the painting that is on the small side. His conclusion: the snail's gripping, out-of-place realism, as it crawls along the bottom line of the inner frame, half-inside, half-outside the scene of the miracle, makes us question the truth value of the deceptively painted (and relatively miniaturized) annunciation, and thus ultimately the mystery of God made flesh. The blindly gliding snail tells us what we have all failed to apprehend—namely, "the emergence of the invisible into the field of vision."⁴ To echo Arasse himself: "All that with a mere snail?"⁵ Patricia Simons, who has since nuanced his reading in her essay "The Salience of the Snail" (a title I have borrowed here), agrees that the creature "encapsulates a short-sighted, spiritually barren focus on the here and now"; it is "marginal yet blatant."⁶

Salience is a quality I want to claim in this chapter for some "marginal yet blatant" literary snails, which in this case might seem even more outrageous when they come into view for just a narrative second, crawling between some rocks in the African desert. But, like Arasse, I will take a closer look and push for the larger significance of what seems like just a passing detail. My reading here will be more constructive than with Aristophanes's hiccups (interpreted in the previous chapter as a textual glitch or stammer that signifies nothing more nor less than



FIGURE 10. Annunciation, Francesco del Cossa, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Photo: Hans Peter Klut/Elke Estel; Wikimedia Commons.

the randomness of things). Why? Partly intuition, again, but it has something to do with the different relationship I see in this case between detail and whole. Both hiccups and snails are random phenomena with striking domino effects for their overall narratives. But while the hiccups are a tease, a necessary quirky supplement that shadows a path not taken, the snails, as we will see, quite literally reveal a path, which makes them integral microcomponents of the world-shaking events they unwittingly set in motion. The path is not a straight one, but the story cannot do without it. Along the way, I will make a larger claim: that in challenging the whole idea that details have only a small part to play in such narratives the snails also have consequences for Sallust's principles of historiography. At the same time, this is something of a plea for overinterpretation.

One factor to keep in mind from the outset is that the snails belong to a text that is panoramic and limited at the same time. Sallust's second monograph after *Catiline*, *Jugurtha* tells the story of a Roman campaign to maintain a delicate power balance in the kingdoms of North Africa in the late second century BCE, some eighty years before he wrote. Sallust says he chose the war not only because it was important and exciting but also because it led to a seismic political shift in Rome, the first substantial challenge to the aristocratic status quo in the shape of its star player Marius, "new man" and radical reformer, whose speech of self-promotion imagined here voices the author's own challenge to elite values. Sallust had himself experienced Africa Nova as its undistinguished governor in the forties BCE: it provided the wealth that enabled the forced retirement (he was tried on the usual charges, for extortion), which he spent writing this history.

In his hands, the Jugurthine War is a capsule episode, a symptom in an overarching diagnosis of Roman imperial growth and moral decline. David Levene has even argued that Sallust presents it as a fragment, in that it lacks obvious closure and appeals to larger continuities, past and future.⁷ This gives it metonymic and metaphorical resonance, both for events at home with which it is so closely intermeshed and for the long history of the Roman Republic. As William Batstone puts it, Africa, with its "shifting sands, ambiguous boundaries, treacherous landscape," suggests the other world of Roman politics, "with its shifting sands, ambiguous boundaries, treacherous landscapes."⁸ In other words, small-large, periphery-center and real-symbolic relations of the kind that will interest me on the microlevel are already essential to the overall makeup of *Jugurtha*.

The moral message of Sallust's histories is far more difficult to pin down. His Africa is a theater for Roman enterprise and resilience, a testing ground for his heroes' ability to live the lessons laid out in the prefaces to both monographs: keep to the true path of virtue, avoid deviant tendencies—above all crookedness (*prauitas*), greed and desire (*cupido* and *lubido*), and trust in chance (*opportunitas*). All his protagonists will fail the test in turn: Jugurtha sells himself to Rome; the Roman general Metellus goes native, outwitting Jugurtha with his treachery. And nothing hides the fact that it is luck, drive, and treachery that propel

Marius and his successor Sulla Felix, "Lucky Sulla," to the top, then over the top, far more quickly and more successfully than conventional virtue could do. So it is that postmodern historiographers have found in Sallust both a sympathetic mistrust in straightforward teleology and a failure to separate virtue from vice that is symptomatic of Roman imperialism.⁹ In the preface to *Catiline*, Sallust is confessional about his complicity with a broken system: this proto-Augustine went off the rails in adolescence but was redeemed by the intellectual life from which politics had diverted him.¹⁰ Writing history becomes his "talking therapy," an attempt to reclaim language and master material in a system that binds him in its toils.¹¹ What hope can there be for his integrity or that of his heroes, when, as Sallust says, even ordinary men (*etiam mediocris uiros*) are so easily sidetracked (*transuersos*) by the hope of rich pickings (*spe praedae*) that opportunity (*opportunitas*) throws in their way?¹²

SNAIL TRAILS

As the end of the work approaches, one such ordinary opportunist *is* sidetracked by rich pickings, so galvanizing a crucial twist in Roman fortunes. The African campaign has reached a stalemate. Metellus has been overtaken by the new energy of Marius, who has just captured the snake-infested city of Capsa, while Sulla, an even greater force of nature, is coming up the ranks. Meanwhile Jugurtha, whose name means "overtaker" in Berber, has outstripped his brothers and peers to become a new Hannibal, a tricky, evasive master of elephants and winding paths.¹³ The challenge Marius now faces is a steep one: an unnamed fortress where the king's remaining treasure is stored, on top of a hill, in the middle of a deserted plateau, with just one narrow, well-guarded path to the top . . .

Until, that is, a nameless Ligurian auxiliary goes off-piste in search of water—and this is where the snails come in:

But after many days and much labor had been expended, Marius began to ponder anxiously whether to abandon the attempt since it was fruitless, or to await the favor of fortune, which he had often employed to his success. While he was vacillating as he turned these matters over for many days and nights, by chance a Ligurian, a common soldier of the auxiliary cohorts, when he had left camp to fetch water, noticed snails crawling among the rocks not far from the side of the fortress which was facing away from the battling. As he went after first one and then another of these creatures and then still more, in his eagerness to gather them he gradually emerged at almost the top of the hill. When he realized the deserted nature of the place, his mind was overcome, after the fashion of human nature, by a desire to perform a difficult feat. By chance, a great oak tree had taken root there among the rocks; having grown horizontally for a short distance, it then turned and soared to a great height, in the direction nature encourages all plants to grow. Supporting himself now with the tree branches, now with projecting rocks, the Ligurian reached the level ground of

the fortress because the Numidians as a whole were intent upon and physically engaged in the fighting that was taking place. After examining everything that he thought would be useful later, he returned by the same way, not heedlessly, as he had gone up, but testing and observing everything. Then he quickly approached Marius, told him what he had done, and urged him to make an attempt on the fortress at the point where he himself had mounted; he promised to be a guide for the dangerous ascent. (*Iug.* 93.1–6; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, rev. Ramsey)

This is an extraordinary piece of writing: detailed, intense—hyperreal, even. I am not alone in admiring it: Graziana Brescia has devoted a full-scale commentary to just this and the two surrounding chapters.¹⁴ Frontinus abbreviates the story in his *Strategemata*, complete with snails (in a section called “Attacks from Unexpected Quarters”).¹⁵ However, they do not make the cut in Florus’ epitome of the Jugurthine War (he prefers the Capsian snakes).¹⁶ In this account, everything really has been observed (*exploratis omnibus*), whether by this eyewitness or some other source. Yet Sallust is typically what Ronald Syme characterizes as a broad-brush historian: “Full particulars about the size of armies, precise intervals of time, or exact itineraries . . . was the function of *commentarii*. Historians are selective, dramatic, impressionistic.”¹⁷ From his postmodernist viewpoint, William Batstone sees Sallust’s tendency to select and dramatize rather differently: “The narrative . . . is in part about how history sinks into the aesthetics of storytelling. Rather than weighing the evidence and arriving at disinterested and objective conclusions about what happened, Sallust toys with the traces, following from uncertainty to duplicity a story of intersecting forces, uncertain motives, and dangerous consequences. This is history as literature.”¹⁸

The obvious question, then, is why, if Sallust is not known for details, does he give so much space to a minor figure’s encounter with some snails and a bendy tree? Is this just a case of unusually myopic precision, or is it “toying with the traces,” singling out something small to give it greater aesthetic or historical significance? In such a tightly woven narrative, where the Gracchan reforms and the siege of Capsa get just a paragraph each, and huge events like the war with Carthage and Sulla’s later atrocities are simply passed over in pregnant silence (better, says Sallust, than saying too little), the account really has to justify the space given to it.¹⁹

Snails, though? They should be beneath the notice of any historian. That is what Horace seems to imply in his *Epistle to Augustus*, where he makes excuses for not writing an epic on the emperor’s *res gestae* (deeds) by claiming that his humble satires, “crawling along the ground” (*repentis per humum*), would be dwarfed by barbarian kingdoms, rivers, and mountain fortresses (which all sounds suspiciously as if he has been reading Sallust).²⁰ As isolated spots in the middle of a sweeping historical narrative, Sallust’s snails do achieve a special salience—far more so than the fellow snails coiled in their slimy houses (*curuarum domus uda coclearum*) in Statius’s catalogue of mediocre Saturnalian gifts (*Silvae* 4.9) or the snails placed at the end of a whole lot of nothing (*nihil*)



FIGURE 11. Mosaic of snails in a basket, fourth century CE, Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, Aquileia. Photo: Carole Raddato; Wikimedia Commons.

in Martial's epigram 8.33. In a historiographical context, to quote Arasse again, "the anomaly of the snail reaches out to you."²¹

The most basic reason for their presence here must be to create a robust reality effect, one that confirms a bizarre eyewitness account. If anything, it is an effect that works even better on a modern reader than an ancient one. One reason the Dresden snail seems so real to us is because it is the only thing in the painting that has not changed over the centuries. Snails look more or less the same today, so much so that Arasse can securely identify del Cossa's as *Helix pomatia*, the Burgundian (or Roman) snail. Ancient Roman snails looked much the same, too, judging from a mosaic from Aquileia of some gathered in a basket, one randomly falling out and another very determined one setting off in the opposite direction to escape its fate (figure 11).

For all that, there is every reason to suspect the story's credentials. Erich Koes-termann calls the snails "too cute to be true" (*zu hübsch um wahr zu sein*), typical of some lost repertoire of ancient military humor (*Soldatenwitz*).²² Sure enough, there is a suspiciously close parallel in book 1 of Herodotus: Cyrus only succeeded in conquering Lydian Sardis because a man called Hyroeades happened to notice a soldier emerging from a vulnerable spot in the walls in pursuit of a fallen helmet.²³ This gives our adventure a touch of fiction, urban myth, or *ben trovato*. Further traces of folktale have been detected in its various ingredients: the anonymity and impregnability of the fortress, the anonymity and humility of the Ligurian, the decisiveness of Marius, and success against all odds for men large and small.²⁴ As an exemplary tale divorced from the surrounding narrative, it has something in

common with two legends of local martyrs recalled in the same work: the Philaeni brothers, who allow themselves to be buried alive to increase their people's territory; and the citizens of Thala, who set themselves on fire after feasting—to avoid the same fate at the hands of the Romans.²⁵

For literary critics, however, reality effects will always compete with an episode or element's metonymic potential. Is this merely background detail or quirk, or is it a microscopic building block in a larger whole? All I am sure of is that this bit player's small victory with its enormous repercussions is strangely magnified. But I also suspect that the snails are there to unsettle not just our sense of scale but equally our sense of time. Marius, who bookends the chapter, provides the most obvious reason to read it as an allegory or premonition of the success story of a far greater opportunist. The repeated word, *forte*, "by chance"—so often in Latin literature the disingenuous marker of a significant coincidence—makes what follows fall into line with a leitmotif of the work as a whole: the element of fortune in history, particularly in the careers of Marius and Sulla.²⁶ *Forte* will recur twice more in the episode, culminating in the propping up of Marius's audacious decision-making.²⁷ The Ligurian's zeal for collecting (*studium legundi*)—his perverse innate desire to do hard-to-do things (*dif-ficilia faciundi*)—thus reads easily as a miniversion of the ambitions of more important characters and their desire to overcome and possess (*potiundi . . . maxuma cupido*) in an imperialist system that Sallust casts as "smash and grab": *ducere trahere rapere* (to take, to snatch, to seize—his spin on Caesar's *ueni uidi uici*).²⁸

Quite plausibly, then, Andrew Feldherr calls the episode "an emphatically Marian story," where the smaller *dux* (scout or sherpa) stands in for the greater leader.²⁹ Again, the snails help join the conceptual dots. As they are to the Ligurian and the Ligurian is to Marius, so the anecdote is to the monograph and the monograph is to universal or annalistic history. As the tiniest things in *Jugurtha*, they are the small acorns from which Marius's big oak will grow (quite literally: the *ilex* here launches a general forever associated with another venerable oak, the *quercus* celebrated in Cicero's *Marius* and revisited in his *Laws*).³⁰ Over the entire narrative hangs the oracular deathbed pronouncement of King Micipsa, echoing Herodotus on the rise and fall of cities, as he fears the exponential growth of Jugurtha, once his little (*paruum*) adopted son:³¹

For in concord, small things grow; in discord, great things collapse. (*Iug.* 10.6)

Even so, I wonder if to privilege Marius over the smaller players in this story isn't to misassign metonym and whole, to belittle the combined forces of human, animal, and plant ingenuity that prompt Sallust's reflections on the predictability of all nature in the service of growth and survival. To say the Ligurian acts "according to the natural human desire" (*more ingeni humani*) for a challenge, and that the tree struggles to find the light "in the direction nature encourages all plants to grow" (*quo cuncta gignentium natura fert*), lifts the narrative to a higher plane, an

impulse that has been readily dismissed as “folk philosophizing.”³² I think Sallust would have been offended to be called a “folk philosopher.” Instead, he is taking time out to reflect on the relationship of man to landscape and on different creatures’ instincts for movement and growth, to register what is universal in the energy that drives human history, as well as human nature. After all, the tale’s coordinates are plotted along axes of broader historical concern to him: chance versus predetermination: crooked versus straight; detail versus whole; circumstantial anecdote versus world event; the morality of human ambition; and the roots of causality. Backing up to discover the primary origins of events is *his* instinct as a historian. In *Catiline* he traces the origins of the conspiracy back to the dictatorship of Sulla, whereas *Jugurtha* has that dictatorship as a future disaster in its sights. Read together, the two monographs tessellate around a taboo episode in Roman history.

The prefaces to both works make it clear enough. Sallust isn’t just a historian: he’s a *natural historian*. He thinks of individuals and cities alike as organic forms. He traces predictable cycles from birth to maturity to decay, and roots physical and ethical habits in biological patterns of growth and the forces of physics—dynamic energy (*uis*) and momentum versus inertia (*inertia*). The start of *Catiline* famously echoes Plato’s *Republic* in making man a vertical animal who aspires to godlike heights but always risks falling back to join horizontal beasts who march on their stomachs.³³ Topographical and ethnographical classifiers further subdivide the human race.³⁴ Numidian nomads, for example, are stereotyped as fast runners and quick-thinking deceivers who shelter from the sun in crude huts, hide camouflaged in the scrub, and never settle anywhere for long before vanishing in a swoosh of desert sand.³⁵

For all that, there is something unprecedented about this campaign—Sallust calls it its *asperitas*, its prickliness or jagged edges—that threatens to snag all such smooth generalizations.³⁶ If Marius can conquer nature (*naturam uincere*) through military conquest, the historian, trying to make sense of an unmappable region and period, is often as disoriented as soldiers caught out by a sudden sandstorm.³⁷ If Sallust’s universalizing asides take him off the main track, at least they guide him for a while. Conserving the sediment of accrued wisdom, they are gestures of control against the uncontrollable.

None of this, though, explains the specificity of snails and ilex when Sallust could so easily have done without them. Surely it is the task of any scout to go scouting, tastebuds or not, always to want to see what lies on the other side of the hill? How much, then, does it matter that it is snails he stumbles on, and not locusts and wild honey, or mushrooms, or even silphium? That it is an ilex, and not just any tree?

To start on the ground with practicalities, snails and tree together could be said to trace an alimentary history of Africa, a place where desire, Sallust’s primary driver of action and movement, so often takes its most elemental form, hunger.



FIGURE 12. Escargotière, Sidi Mansour, Gafsa (Capsa), Tunisia. Photo: M. Rais; Wikimedia Commons.

Snails are a wholly plausible feature of the African landscape (having evolved from marine to inland habitats). Pliny the Elder calls African ones the most prolific of all.³⁸ It so happens that the Capsian area of the Mahgreb (that is, eastern Algeria and southern Tunisia) houses the densest prehistoric deposits of snail shells (now called *escargotières*). Indeed, archaeologists believe that snails were once so plentiful as foraged food that they may even have helped delay the onset of agriculture in the region (figure 12).³⁹ Snail stalls are still routine on the streets of North Africa as a local fast food (or should that be slow food?). Hunger also helps to explain why this is an *ilex* tree, in country we are told is short on trees, indeed bare of any plants.⁴⁰ Again, the specificity gives a ring of truth.⁴¹ The holm oak *is* native to North Africa as to other Mediterranean countries, but it also bears edible acorns, another source of wild food for hungry peoples.

One effect, however, of the Jugurthan campaign was to turn everyone into nomads and scavengers. Not only are the pre-Herculean inhabitants of Africa described as restless and roaming about (*uagi palantes*) but the Roman invaders, too, “roamed about restlessly, wasting the fields” (*uagabantur, et palantes agros uastare*).⁴² While Numidian cattlemen take their meat and milk with them (like Tacitus’s Germans, not needing the fussy condiments essential to civilized Roman life), Marius commends himself for not giving fancy dinners like his aristocratic rivals.⁴³ In 46 BCE, Sallust himself had invaded the island of Cercina, off Tunis,

to capture Pompey's grain supply.⁴⁴ His thoughts about foraging versus luxury (chance versus design, in eating terms) make the snails a serendipitous find from both viewpoints: caviar discovered in the wild, as it were, an image for colonial depredation. This is after all a story of eaters and eaten, hunters and prey. If modern aesthetic theory associates the "cute" with affective responses to powerlessness and commodification, that makes the snails sweet but helpless victims in the history of imperialism.⁴⁵ As for the solitary ilex, it suggests an earlier pedigree for the "lone tree and sunset motif," which, as Liv Yarrow has shown in a fascinating article, came to symbolize a safe version of colonized Africa on nineteenth- and twentieth-century coins and medals.⁴⁶

Hunger even explains why the scout is specifically Ligurian. By Sallust's time, this mountainous, forested region between Italy and Gaul had come under Roman control. But in Jugurtha's time, it was still an ambiguous buffer state, scene of frequent skirmishes and once the site of a glorious victory for Mago the Carthaginian. Liguria had poor soil; its inhabitants were the rugged foragers of Europe:

They are continually hunting, whereby they get abundant game and compensate in this way for the lack of the fruits of the field. Consequently, spending their lives as they do on snow-covered mountains, where they are used to traversing unbelievably rugged places, they become vigorous and muscular of body. Some of the Ligurians, because they lack the fruits of the earth, drink nothing but water, and eat the flesh of both domestic and wild animals and fill themselves with the green things which grow in the land, the land they possess being untrodden by the most kindly of the gods, namely, Demeter and Dionysus. (Diod. Sic. 5.39.3; Loeb, trans. Oldfather)

Ligurians were equally associated with deceit: it was a trickster's ruse that would overthrow the Numidian camp.⁴⁷ Hardy, lean, and enterprising, this fish out of geographical water adapts his hunter-gatherer skills to a new, arid environment. But his first impulse, hunger, is in his genes.

In other ways, though, the Ligurian transcends his ethnicity to become a kind of Everyman, driven on by luck, curiosity, and greed, those ethically ambivalent opposites of traditional virtue that seduce all humans ("after the fashion of human nature") and impel them to keep on grabbing and pushing. Plato had warned how easily man's progress from empirical discovery to abstract wisdom, from low desires to uprightness, can be derailed by *pleonexia*, wanting more.⁴⁸ Hunger is here just the baseline of an upward story of compulsion and desire. The Ligurian's inch-by-inch decision-making, as he spots first one snail (*unam*), just one more (*atque alteram*), then more still (*dein plures*), recalls the quickfire transitions in Seneca's *Thyestes* from satisfied to renewed appetite, when Atreus, high on his meaty sacrifice, tells the history of the Tantalid house in 1.5 lines: "It's good, it's plenty, it's enough at last even for me. But wait. Why is it enough?"⁴⁹

In his 1957 novel *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*), Italo Calvino tells the tale of Cosimo, a boy who rebels against aristocratic mores at the time of Napoleon's drastic deforestation of Liguria by climbing a tree on the family estate,

the start of a lifetime's treebound existence and, with it, a uniquely enlightened perspective on human folly. It is my guess that Calvino, born in Cuba to botanist parents but later acclimatized, along with other tropical specimens, in their plant laboratory in Sanremo, was introduced at some point in his classical education to Sallust's description of another Ligurian's escapade.⁵⁰ Cosimo's rebellion is precipitated, after all, by his refusal to eat some snails that his sadistic sister, the nun Battista, has served up for dinner, at which point he climbs the nearest tree, which just happens to be an ilex (*leccio*). As with Sallust's greedy Ligurian, Cosimo's motives transcend simple depredation and reach toward the heights of human possibility. As his brother relates, "we spent hours and hours in the trees, and not for utilitarian reasons, like many boys, who climb up just to look for fruit or birds' nests, but for the pleasure of overcoming difficult protuberances and forks, and getting as high as possible, and finding beautiful places to stop and look at the world below, to make jokes and shout at those who passed under us."⁵¹

Calvino's novel ends by comparing Cosimo's arboreal gymnasium, a rope net of flimsy branches, to his own precarious storytelling, a "thread of ink" that "now twists on itself, now forks, now links knots of sentences with edges of leaves or clouds, and then stumbles, and then resumes twisting."⁵² Andrew Feldherr has observed how firmly Sallust's narrative of progress is scaffolded by its horizontal and vertical axes: the fortress, the climb, and the steplike shape of the tree.⁵³ Yet aslant this grid, to my mind, run some equally well-defined lines, ones that vindicate lateral thinking, maverick behavior, and queer patterns of growth. Spatially and morally, these slanted axes plot alternative routes to success. Democritus had once claimed that twisted plants are more resilient, thanks to the slower distribution of their nutrients.⁵⁴ And just as the Ligurian's ascent is described as "random," "unplanned," or "blind" (*temere*), so the thought processes that lead him there are decisive but transverse. We almost feel the neurons fire his flickering glances (*animum aduortit . . . animum alio uortit*), glances as angular as the twisting tree—whose name, on second thought, is perhaps chosen because it *sounds* bendy (*inflexa . . . ilex*).⁵⁵ This is man as *polutropos*, looking not straight ahead but behind the fighting (*auersum proeliantibus*). Later, Sallust will take an equally wry squint at the warped oppositions of human morality: "Human affairs are so fluid and unstable [*fluxae et mobiles*], they are always turning into their opposite" [*semper in aduersa mutantur*].⁵⁶

While both snail and tree have adapted by moving athwart inhospitable terrain, it remains odd that Sallust gives us far more detail about the tree, as it evolves horizontally (*prona*), then bends (*inflexa*) and pushes upward (*in altitudinem*), obeying universal biological laws but with an idiosyncratic shape that consolidates (*coahuerat*) the singular will and history of its growth (traumatopic, whether from lack of light or flattening desert wind). Gerard Manley Hopkins would name this singularity "inscape":

There is one notable dead tree . . . the inscape markedly holding its most simple and beautiful oneness up from the ground through a graceful swerve below (I think) the spring of the branches up to the tops of the timber. (Hopkins, *Notebooks* = House 1937, 154)

When Hopkins uses the word again in a letter to Robert Bridges, it comes with hints about his own idiosyncrasies: "Now it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive, and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped."⁵⁷

Other queer trees in Latin literature come freighted with partly hidden messages. The plane, for example, that overhangs Atedius Melior's lake in Statius's *Silvae* 2.3, then dives down only to grow straight up again as if coming from the water's depths, not only conjures the legend of a nymph and a lovesick Pan but also configures decline and revival in the family fortunes of Melior's friend Blaesus.⁵⁸ In *Carm.* 1.12, Horace uses an image of a tree's roots for the subterranean endurance of another noble Roman family: "The reputation of Marcellus grows unseen, like a tree, in hidden time."⁵⁹ Sallust's tree suggests a similarly precarious version of human history, its branches tracing man's evolution from earthbound beast to mountain climber, always threatened by gravity and an uncertain foothold. As it winds along and up among the rocks (*inter saxa*), first horizontally, then vertically, it tracks not just homo sapiens but also the snails (which also crawl *inter saxa*): a *grandis ilex* mirrors a small helix.

Were it human, Sallust's tree might be called *praua*, bent; instead, it is merely *prona*, then *inflexa*. At least it has agency and personality. The snails just creep, mere specimens of a genus, too low a lifeform to be anything but prey. In 2015, scientists from Lund University revealed how grossly we have underestimated the individuality of snails' bodies and behavior. When they tapped a sample group of 168 snails lightly with tweezers to see how they reacted—with alarm, predictably—then timed how long it took for each one to poke its head back out of its shell, they found strong correlations between speed of response, feeding habits, and thickness of shells.⁶⁰ But Sallust's snails tell us almost more about the Ligurian—what happens when gastronome meets gastropod—than about their own lives. For all the parallels between the motor impulses of snails and tree, he seems to have the biological hierarchy the wrong way around—at least according to Plutarch's categories:

Why do we not say that one tree is less intelligent than another, as a sheep is, compared with a dog; or one vegetable more cowardly than another, as a stag is, compared with a lion? Is the reason not that, just as it is impossible to call one immovable object slower than another, so among all creatures to whom Nature has not given the faculty of understanding, we cannot say that one is more cowardly or more slothful or more intemperate? Whereas it is the presence of understanding, of one kind in one animal, of another kind in another, and in varying degree, that has produced the observable differences. (Plut. *De Soll. An.* 4 = *Mor.* 963; Loeb, trans. Cherniss and Helmbold)

All the contempt Plutarch directs at unmoving plants Sallust diverts to snails, those virtual vegetables.

SLOW HISTORIES

In the end, we only know one thing about the snails (apart from their plurality and their haphazard patterning): they crawl. Slow locomotion has always been the snail's salient characteristic (English "snail," from Old English "snaegl," has, like "snake," etymological roots in the idea of crawling). When a giant mechanical snail headed the processions of Demetrius of Phaleron, tyrant of Athens in the fourth century BCE, emitting a trail of slime and followed by a string of donkeys, Demochares explained that both snail and donkeys were there to mock the Athenians for being submissive to their overlord, Cassander of Macedon.⁶¹ Plautus calls legal advocates *spissigradissimos*, "sluggish walkers," whose gouty steps make them slower even than snails.⁶² But Sallust's snails do not simply evoke slowness. The single descriptor "crawling" (*repentis*) makes us think about space and time at once. In an environment where distances are vast and speed is key, the tiny snails slow down not just the Ligurian's pace but the entire narrative, forcing a microscopic focus before the sweeping overview returns.⁶³ As Susan Stewart has suggested, it takes longer, slows down time, to look at miniature things.⁶⁴

In short, the snails, with their slow pace and obtrusive tininess, may have something to tell us about Sallust's approach to historiography. After all, when snails have been used or cited in scientific experiments, it tends to be in connection with Sallustian concepts like space and time, chaos and predictability, the momentary and the longer term. Cellular automata, for example, model the spiraling patterns found in nature—in seashells or a *romanesco* cauliflower; Feldherr even refers to Sallust's "fractal" representations of landscape.⁶⁵ One such experiment dates from the 1930s, when Gerhard Brecher tried to give some scientific heft to the claim of nineteenth-century biologist Karl Ernst Von Baer that "the moment" (*der Moment* or *der Augenblick*) can be defined as the smallest unit of subjectively experienced time ("The time we need for our sense organs to be conscious of its impression"), something that varies among different life forms.⁶⁶ So it was that Brecher made a snail crawl continuously on top of a floating rubber ball, tapping its belly at the same time and testing the interval between its forward thrusts, to show how intrinsic memory is to the perception of a unit of time—one quarter of a second, in the snail's case (figure 13).⁶⁷ Joining the separate stimuli together conceptually, the snail took them as a signal to start crawling forwards in a continuous line.

More surprisingly still, Yale art historian George Kubler adapted Brecher's claims in a paper titled "Style and the Representation of Historical Time" (Kubler 1967). He used the idea that isolated moments create the illusion of a continuum to define artistic style as "a way of imposing space upon time and of denying duration under the illusion that successive events are similar events." "The historian," says

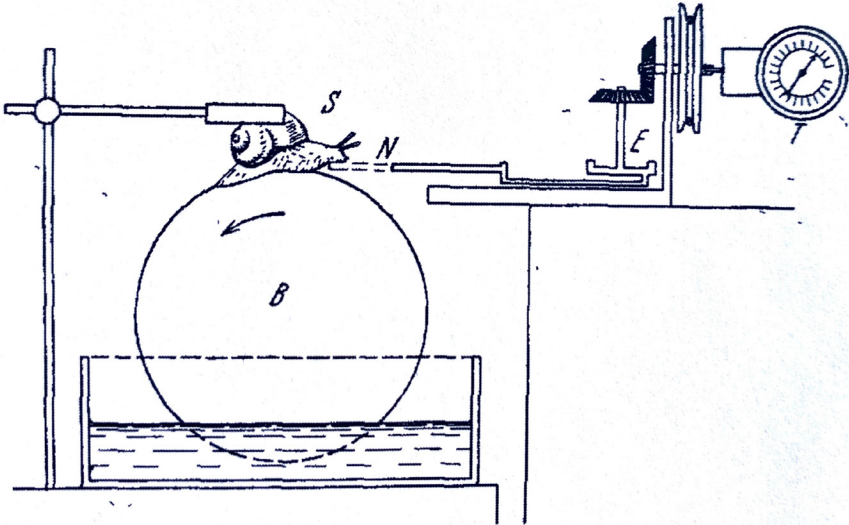


Abb. 3. Versuchsanordnung zur Messung des Schneckenmomentes.
B Ball, E Exzenter, N Nadel, S Schnecke, T Tachometer.

FIGURE 13. Gerhard Brecher's snail experiment (Brecher 1937: 215). Author's photo.

Kubler, "is at liberty to stress either the regularity of artificial periods (centuries, decades) or the irregularity of actual durations"; in both cases, repetitions "induce a *spatialization*, or illusion of coherent surface, which some of us call style" (emphasis original).⁶⁸ In the Dresden Annunciation, the snail's slow progress across the canvas has another effect beyond reminding us that God was slow to send his son to earth: it creates the illusion that past miracle and present humdrum reality, del Cossa's and our own, are fused into one glutinous continuity. This kind of realism has quite the opposite effect from that produced by the *trompe l'oeil* fly that Daniel Arasse remembers, humiliatingly, reaching out to flick off another painting in Dresden. A painted fly, so often an erratic fixture in the still life tradition, is the very essence of momentariness caught in perpetuity.⁶⁹ If we tried to flick off the snail, we would expect resistance; time, we would find, would be congealed.

At first sight, no place could be slipperier than *Jugurtha's* monotonous desert for getting a handle on either time or space (if we borrow Andrew Riggsby's neat definition of space as the thing that "allows for the objects it contains to be related to each other").⁷⁰ Sallust even suggests a causal link between the infiniteness of the desert and the infinite warfare it prolongs:⁷¹

The land between them was sandy, undifferentiated [*una specie*, "with only one face"], without river or mountain to mark their boundaries. This circumstance kept the people engaged in a great and protracted war [*in magno diuturnoque bello*]. (*Iug.* 79.3)



FIGURE 14. Snail and other small creatures, acanthus frieze, Portico of Eumachia, Pompeii, late first century BCE. Photo: Album; Alamy Stock Photo.

Yet a feature of any landscape with “only one face” is that its small details are far more likely to become salient.⁷² After all, the Romans are frequently forced to comb the horizon for outcrops (camouflaged Numidians or protruding elephants) and repeatedly caught out by optical illusions. Pliny writes of phantom men who loom up in the African desert and vanish in a moment.⁷³ Centuries later, in *The Sheltering Sky* (first published in 1949), Paul Bowles would observe a similar effect in the mirages or visuo-spatial errors generated by the unique sameness of the Sahara:

The desert landscape is always at its best in the half-light of dawn or dusk. The sense of distance lacks: a ridge nearby can be a far-off mountain range, each small detail can take on the importance of a major variant on the countryside's repetitious theme. (Bowles 2009, 286)

So, too, the eponymous hero of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* reflects on the natural tracking devices of the desert:

When I was lost among them, unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place. (Ondaatje 1992, 20)

As Andrew Feldherr sees it, the desert's expanse of barely relieved blankness makes a near-perfect (if ungraspable) canvas for thinking about relations between space and time.⁷⁴ I would add that the snails function as token gripping points on this treacherous surface. Momentary spots that enter the visual field one by one, then proliferate, they provide an analogy on the ground for

sporadic cognitive circuits. We are never actually told whether they left a slimy trail behind; it is the Ligurian who must deduce the path (supposing he dropped the shells, like Hansel and Gretel, he could more easily retrace his steps).⁷⁵ But joining the scattered dots conceptually not only provides an accurate route to the desired water-source: it also breaks the narrative's temporal span into smaller units (*paulum . . . paulatim*).

I am reminded of the similar effect that a variant word for a small unit of time, *paulisper* ("for a little while"), produces in a passage of Cicero's *Pro Milone*. As part of his uphill (and ultimately doomed) rhetorical attempt to exonerate his old ally, the thug Milo, Cicero conjures up an interlude of such innocuous domesticity that it would be hard to imagine his client setting off to commit a murder on the Appian Way. In this version of events, Milo returned home from a day at the Senate, removed his shoes and day clothes (we are carefully not yet told how he redressed for the journey) and waited for his wife to get ready:

But Milo, because he had been in the Senate that day until the Senate was dismissed, came home; he changed his shoes and clothes; for a little while, he waited, while his wife got ready, as men always have to [*paulisper, dum se uxor, ut fit, comparat, commoratus est*]; then he set out at the time when Clodius might have returned, if he had been going to come to Rome that day. (Cic. *Mil.* 10.28)

The preparations are presented in a sentence of little pauses and parentheses for which *paulisper* functions almost as shorthand, a sentence so choppy with stops and starts that both syntax and characters—Milo, who indulgently "waited for a little while" (*paulisper . . . commoratus est*), and his wife, who predictably, like all women (*ut fit*), lingered over her toilette—come to figure the leisurely delaying tactics of the orator himself, as Cicero plays for time to stave off an inevitable conviction.⁷⁶

As I hinted earlier, it is in their capacity as spatio-temporal markers that the snails may have something significant to tell us about historiographical method. Jonas Grethlein has claimed that Sallust's tendency to incorporate alternative teleologies when looking at the same event makes him an early devotee, if he but knew it, of Reinhart Koselleck's "slices of history," *Zeitschichten*, a term coined to denote "the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous."⁷⁷ Grethlein explains: "The image of different geological strata that are layered on top of each other, partly separate, partly entangled with each other, is well-suited to express the multitude of times that come together in history: natural history, *longue durée*, microhistories, and so on."⁷⁸ Koselleck's "slices" strike me as particularly helpful for thinking about the juxtaposed speeds and natural histories of the cohabitants of this African outcrop: man, snails and tree. Snails (we know now) are among the oldest animals in the world; trees (the Romans knew this, too) are even older. Again, modern readers are even better placed to appreciate the different layers, to read the episode not just as a record of a historical event but also as a time-lapse allegory of man's

intervention in the environment, a speeded-up account of the opportunistic raids of the Anthropocene.

SNAIL OFFENSIVE

We could leave it there: a brief existential pause before the narrative action resumes, a sublime overview of the sluggish locomotion typical of all human endeavour if seen from a distance, by scouts or historians.⁷⁹ But there is another aspect to the snails—their practical contribution to the Roman cause, we could call it—that is yet to be revealed. If the Ligurian “checked out all that he thought would be of use in the future,” his data-gathering exercise evidently included what he saw on the way up, too. This emerges when Marius orders a reconnaissance party to verify the report:⁸⁰

Marius sent a party of those present with the Ligurian to test his report. Each one pronounced the task difficult or easy according to his nature. Still, the consul's spirit was somewhat buoyed. And so he sent five of the swiftest from his band of trumpet-ers and horn-players and with them, for protection, four centurions, and told them all to follow the Ligurian's orders and decided on the next day for the operation. (*Iug.* 93.7–8; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, rev. Ramsey)

Each soldier reacts according to his nature (*ingenium*), in pronouncing the task difficult or easy. Note that Sallust is still dividing human nature into subtypes (though the information also has the virtue of expanding the pool of witnesses).

In what follows, the level of detail continues to be intense:

Now when it appeared to be time according to Marius's instructions, the Ligurian proceeded to the spot after all preparations and arrangements had been made. Those who were going to make the ascent, in keeping with the previous instructions of their guide, had changed their arms and equipment, baring their heads and feet so as to be able to see better and climb among the rocks more easily. On their backs were swords and shields, but the latter of Numidian design, made of hide, both because of their lighter weight and so that they would make less noise if bumped. And so the Ligurian, going on ahead, fastened ropes to the rocks and roots, if they stuck out as a result of age, so that pulled up by means of them the soldiers might more easily make the ascent. Sometimes he hoisted up with his hand those whom the unusual nature of the route alarmed; where the ascent was a little too rough, he sent men ahead one at a time unarmed and then followed himself, bringing their arms. He was first to test spots that appeared to offer uncertain support, and by repeatedly climbing up and back down the same way, and then at once stepping aside, he bolstered the courage of the rest. Accordingly, after a long time and great exertion, they finally reached the fortress, deserted at that point because all the defenders, as on other days, were face to face with the enemy. (*Iug.* 94.1–3; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, rev. Ramsey)

The little band is well equipped by its Ligurian *dux* to suit the terrain. Heads and feet are left bare, to allow a better view and an easier foothold among the

rocks. Shields and swords are carried on backs, the shields made of Numidian hide, apparently lighter and less noisy when struck. But these hides are not just practical and adaptive: they also function as a kind of camouflage. Going native to deceive the enemy, the Romans dress as Numidians, or rather, Numidian beasts of burden. Or even . . .

The snails, it turns out, have given the Ligurian more than just a delicious snack. They have also given him a strategic plan. It is never explicitly stated, but this stumbling, encumbered procession back up the mountain looks like nothing so much as a caravan of snails: bareheaded and barefoot, peering timidly out from under hard but lightweight protective shells. On second thoughts, in this harsh landscape an analogy with its smallest inhabitants is not too surprising. The word used here of the soldiers' exposed extremities, *nudus*, is also Horace's word for snails served without their shells, in a cooking context; Sallust uses it to describe both unarmed soldiers and the African desert, devoid of plants.⁸¹ After all, protection against the elements and lightness of maneuver are among the top essentials for desert survival. What the Ligurian must have noticed on the way up is that snails—humble and profoundly earthbound as they are—have always had the advantage in managing vertical climbs. The soldiers need to make up for lack of suction and slimy grip by attaching ropes and pitons (*clauī*) to the rocks and roots that snails just glide past.

In this sun-baked, bare terrain, snails set an example to everyone who takes their house with them for shelter from the elements.⁸² They are miniatures of the Numidian nomads, equally amphibious creatures, descended, Sallust tells us, from Persian sailors who settled on the coast and used the hulls of their ships to roof their huts, then gradually moved inland and learned to pitch camp in the desert.⁸³ From the earliest Greek literature, snails and human travellers have been aligned. The same epithet, *phereoikos*, "house-carrier," is used by Hesiod of snails and by Herodotus of Scythian nomads.⁸⁴ As the poet Philemon puts it, "How clever a creature is the snail, by Zeus! If ever he finds himself with a bad neighbour, he just takes up his house and moves away, and lives free from care, leaving those who annoy him behind."⁸⁵ At one point on the expedition, when the gradient is particularly steep and the Ligurian offers to carry his comrades' armour for them, they even briefly turn into slugs. This is work that cannot be rushed. Indeed, the little party goes at a snail's pace: arriving finally (*tandem*) and much fatigued (*multumque fatigati*).

For anyone who remains sceptical, another clue that Sallust, like the Ligurian, is thinking all along about the lessons that nature teaches is about to appear. A battle with the Numidians ensues in front of the fortress walls (94.3–6), and the Roman army for the first time on this campaign uses its traditional defensive "tortoise" formation (*testudo*), shields interlocked in a thick, impermeable outer layer.⁸⁶ Plutarch describes it as follows, etymologizing *testudo* rightly from *testa*, roof tile: "The resulting appearance is very like that of a roof, affords a striking spectacle, and is the most effective of protections against arrows, which glide off



FIGURE 15. Testudo formation, Trajan's column (from plaster cast in National Museum of Romanian History, Bucharest). Photo: ChristianChirita; Wikimedia Commons.

from it.⁸⁷ When it comes to real-life *testudines*, Pliny writes about African land turtles, which inhabit the driest parts of the desert and live on dew, and the turtles of the Indian Ocean, so huge that islanders roof their houses with a single shell or use it as a boat.⁸⁸ This takes us straight back to Sallust's description of the Numidian huts with their curved sides, roofed with the hulls of ships. Along with snails and Numidians, turtles adapted early from aquatic origins to arid inland habitats. In the Middle Ages, *testudo* was even interchangeable with *limax* as the Latin word for snail.⁸⁹

To return to the parallel in Herodotus from Cyrus's Sardis campaign, it even turns out that Hyroeades, the man who saw a soldier emerge from a gap in the ramparts to retrieve a fallen helmet, was a Mardian—that is, he came from a tribe of Persian nomads who lived in the mountains bordering the Caspian Sea. What is more, the McGuffin in that story, the cap or helmet (*kunea*) separated from its wearer, functions metonymically, like the snails, for larger themes in the story: vulnerable places exposed and weak points in military defences.

Finally, why do trumpeters and horn players take up such a large section of the party? Five of them to four centurions? Their strategic function is clear enough: to sound a misleadingly loud alarm from the back of the camp to terrify and scatter the enemy. But it may also be because of how their instruments look. The *cornu*, played by a *cornicen*, a horn player, was a twisted G-shaped contraption, whereas



FIGURE 16. Roman limestone relief with funeral procession from Amiternum, showing trumpeters and horn players, Augustan period, Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, L'Aquila, Abruzzo, Italy. Photo: Dan Diffendale; Flickr.

the *tuba* was a long straight horn. Does the presence of the instruments complete the picture of these slow-moving travellers by suggesting the snail's projecting eyes, which Pliny calls horns, *cornua*, and which he says the snail uses to test its route in advance (*praetemptans iter*)?⁹⁰

All that with mere snails? At least I hope to have shown how solidly the snails belong in *Jugurtha*, with what determination they own their place, and how unstickable they are from Sallust's multilayered reading of the challenges of desert life. So far, several relationships have emerged between the different narrative levels. It is clear enough that the Ligurian sherpa reads as a miniature of Marius and other human opportunists. Less obviously, he can also be seen as a smaller version of the historian as naturalist or explorer—enthusiastic student of all life-forms and twisted genius, quick-witted and resourceful. Like the Ligurian, Sallust is a collector, for whom the Jugurthine War is a prize specimen, chosen for its exceptional size (*magna*) and shifting colours (*uaria*). In the preface to *Catiline*, Sallust even identifies his tight selection process as “cherry-picking”:

I decided to write the history of the Roman people piecemeal [*carptim*], according to what seemed worth recording. (*Cat.* 4.2)

This suggests both the hunter gatherer, plucking choice gastropods like stationary fruit, and the detached observer from a high place, from which all historical characters, even Marius and Sulla, look small and slow (as Plutarch said, “It is impossible to call one immovable object slower than another”).⁹¹ If, like Calvino's tree-climbing baron, the historian is “positioned above the fray,” thanks to his “sovereign intellect,” here he stoops for just a moment to scoop up the weakest, most microcosmic and beleaguered units of empire-building.⁹²



FIGURE 17. “An Incident in the Jugurthine War,” *Cassells Illustrated Universal History*, Edmund Ollier (1893–96). Photo: De Luan; Alamy Stock Image.

But George Kubler makes another comparison altogether in the opening paragraph of his essay on the moment and artistic style, which includes this startling sentence: “To spatialize time is a faculty shared both by snails and by historians.”⁹³ Sallust, for one, seems to know what he means. He fills the moralizing preface to *Jugurtha* with indictments of laziness; words like *socordia*, *inertia* and *torpescere* characterize the human animal at its sluggish worst. But before he knows it, he is fighting for his own reputation. “I believe that some people,” he says, “will give my useful labour [*utilis labor*] the name of laziness [*inertia*], people who think it is the hardest kind of work [*industria*] to greet the people and enjoy the pleasures of feasting.”⁹⁴ The historian is on the warpath against elite values and leisure practices. In Yelena Baraz’s words: “*otium* is construed as occupied with a true *negotium*, while his imagined critics’ activities, which are more normally seen as the *negotia* of a Roman senator, appear frivolous.”⁹⁵ Sallust’s claim to industry of a different kind—discreet, apolitical, timeless—should make him all too sympathetic to the snails as they wind between the rocks (*inter saxa*) just as he and his human characters navigate tricky historical and political obstacles.⁹⁶ The historian may be lofty and detached, but he shares something critical with these lowly creatures: the risk that his life’s work will be grievously underrated. I think the special salience of his slow-moving snails shows us the way to understanding that.⁹⁷



FIGURE 18. Roman column base with palm tree and snails (?), Volubilis, Morocco. Author's photo.