Shaw Before His First Play

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“I just to stir things up seems a great reward in itself.”
—Caius Sallustius Crispus

Caius Sallustius Crispus is a mysterious and subtle signifier in Bernard Shaw’s writings. As Sallust, the Roman political philosopher appears in only one early work, Shaw’s last completed novel—and there only as the hideaway address of the hero. Shaw’s fifth novel, An Unsocial Socialist, was an apparently foreshortened effort suggesting that he had found more congenial avenues for his ideas. Originally titled The Heartless Man, the novel was drafted in Pitman shorthand at a desk in the domed Reading Room of the British Museum. Largely dialogue-based, An Unsocial Socialist foreshadows his plays, especially Man and Superman, which also focuses upon an attractive, compulsive and moneyed young gentleman given to radical polemics and susceptible to the wiles of women.

Shaw finished his rewrite, in 336 handwritten pages, in December 1883. He had intended a longer and more polemical work, he later claimed, but possibly he had wearied of the split personality hobbling his hero, who is both reformer and charlatan, vagabond and mountebank, wooer and hermit. Publishers, each in turn as Shaw’s packet of manuscript was returned by the post, rejected the novel. One critic, John Morley, better known later as a Liberal politician, described it as “paradoxical, absurd and impossible.” The author, Morley conceded, “knows how to write; he is pointed, rapid, forcible, sometimes witty, often powerful and occasionally eloquent.” Yet he questioned the sustained irony—whether readers would wonder whether the author “was serious or was laughing at them.” Shaw seemed to seek both reactions simultaneously—to Victorian publishers a suicidal commercial strategy. An Unsocial Socialist appeared as a low-print-run book only after it was first serialized, a year earlier, for no payment, in the monthly socialist magazine, To-Day, from March into December 1884.

Through the Zetetical Society, a debating circle of politically radical young men in London, Shaw had become friendly with the schol-
arly young Sidney Webb, who apparently gave his name although not his personality to the novel’s flamboyantly heartless socialist, Sidney Trefusis. Almost immediately on meeting Webb, Shaw considered the dumpy, scraggly bearded but surprisingly learned Colonial Office clerk the most brilliant mind in England. Appearances seldom deceived Shaw. Forcing his friendship on the mumbling cockney who looked like a caricature of a nineteenth-century German professor, Shaw augmented at second hand his own Dublin dropout education.

It is possible that Shaw learned of Sallust (86 B.C.–34 B.C.) from the widely read Webb and followed up hints about the Roman worthy from the capacious shelves of the Reading Room. An aristocrat and a senator, Sallust had called himself a novus homo—a “new man.” (The term echoes in Shaw.) Attacking Cicero as an upper-class demagogue, Sallust espoused the causes of the plebs—the common people. Attaching himself to Julius Caesar, Sallust commanded a legion in North Africa. Returning to Rome in 44 B.C., he was accused of plundering his conquered province, but through Caesar’s intervention was never brought to trial. (A later accusation of immorality, scurrilous gossip at odds with his writings, may have originated in the confusion between him and his adopted son, Sallustius Crispus, a minister of Caesar Augustus, and known for great wealth and luxurious tastes.) The end of Sallust’s public career and his retirement to his garden and to writing apparently came after Caesar’s assassination. Shaw’s pithy remarks attributed to Julius Caesar in Caesar and Cleopatra may owe something to Sallust’s writings about Roman politics. (A “Sallust of Perusia” appears as a betrayer of Emperor Julian the Apostate in Ibsen’s turgid The Emperor and the Galilean, and is mentioned once in Shaw’s The Quintessence of Ibsenism in 1890. The character bears no relation to the earlier Sallust.)

An Unsocial Socialist is set in 1875. Sidney Trefusis, the possessor of inherited manufacturing wealth about which he feels guilty, and wed to an attractive heiress, runs off after six weeks of marriage. Henrietta, whom he professes to love, is devastated, but Sidney nevertheless returns to a country cottage he calls Sallust’s House. The retreat, complete to a library, where he masquerades improbably as the plebeian “Jeff Smilash,” is close to Manchester, where much of his late father’s mill-based income was generated. Marriage was an impulsive mistake. Trefusis claims to need freedom from his new, unexpectedly restrictive conjugal yoke to work at political proselytizing. He predicates his flight with flattery. “The first condition of work with me is your absence,”
he explains to the baffled Henrietta. “When you are with me I can do nothing but make love to you. You bewitch me.” Two millenia earlier Sallust had written: “No mortal man has ever served at the same time his passions and his best interests.”

Pursuing Sidney into the provinces, Henrietta returns without her husband, who sweet-talks her and sends her home. Ill from exposure in the bleak December weather, she dies, two days before Christmas, of pneumonia, misdiagnosed by expensive doctors summoned by her father. Back in London too late to matter, Trefusis rails against fashionable but ignorant physicians in one of Shaw’s earliest ratiades against members of the medical fraternity, who, like other professionals, protected each other. One of the specialists who had been called in when Henrietta’s suffering seemed beyond the skills of the family’s general practitioner explains: “Everything was done that could be done, Mr. Trefusis.”

“Professional etiquette,” Trefusis feels, but leaves unspoken, “bound [the physician] so strongly that, sooner than betray his colleague’s inefficiency, he would have allowed him to decimate half of London.” A citation from Sallust would have confirmed that: “It is in the nature of ambition to make men liars and cheats, and hide the truth in their breasts, and show, like jugglers, another thing in their mouths.”

“The glory of riches and of beauty is frail and transitory,” Sallust had also written. Henrietta’s mother assures Sidney that there had been no neglect of his wife. “What have I to complain about?” he responds coldly, in his most extreme political vein, although he had wept, to his own surprise, at her deathbed. “She had a warm room and a luxurious bed to die in, with the best medical advice in the world. Plenty of people are starving and freezing to-day that we may have the means to die fashionably....” Adding to his outrageous treason to his class Trefusis also opts—to his father-in-law’s horror—for a “common” tombstone by a journeyman stonecutter rather than an extravagant and florid one, for the lifeless remains of Henrietta were beyond appreciating the superfluous art of a Royal Academician. (“No grief reaches the dead,” Sallust had observed.) Sidney’s apparent brutality—his aversion from extravagant show—sustains the alleged heartlessness of the novel’s original title. Henrietta is interred in Highgate Cemetery, where Karl Marx would be buried in the year Shaw wrote An Unsocial Socialist.

As a widower not given to mourning, Sidney Trefusis remains easily bewitched. Again in Sallust’s House, he indulges only briefly in what he misdescribes as his “lonely ascetic hermit life,” surrounded by a li-
library of “dry books” that spur his “Socialist propagandism.” By novel-
istic coincidence the Sallustian hermitage happens to be close to Alton
College, an exclusive academy for well-to-do young women. And the
burden of maintaining credibly his plebeian alter ego as a workman-
for-hire becomes increasingly difficult in the lively feminine ambience.
The opportunities afforded by the finishing school are, for Trefusis, like
netting goldfish from a bowl.

One of the Alton maidens is the high-spirited Agatha Wylie, who by
mid-novel is expelled for misbehavior. (The college’s petty rules are
rigid.) By no coincidence, she is the niece and ward of the late Henri-
etta’s father, a banker. The compulsively social socialist, with an obvi-
ously faked humble bearing, conceals himself much too visibly at Sal-
lust’s House—itself a rather odd name for his cottage unless Sallust had
some unexplained significance. Trefusis could have christened it, for
example, Marx’s House. Or left it unnamed.

“Jeff Smilash” fancies the lively girls, especially Agatha, but claims to
be beyond their pale as an uneducated day laborer seeking work at the
college. (Sidney Trefusis actually has a Cambridge degree.) As Smilash
he also goads workmen in the area to claim various political rights, in-
cluding a public right-of-way through such private land as the school’s
“pleasure ground.” At any opportunity he pours Marxist scorn on the
commercialization of music, dance, painting, fiction and the other arts
so important to the school’s curriculum.

Just after Sidney’s flight from marriage, Agatha had written to Hen-
rietta—prompting his wife’s chase after him and her death—that she
had recognized him despite his pseudo-cockney talk and his corduroy
workman’s garb. While also attracted by Jeff Smilash, the other girls
fail to see through him as a moneyed crank and adventurer as well
as a philandering provocateur—a very social socialist. Smilash’s inher-
ited wealth as Trefusis is unknown to all of the girls but Agatha, yet
her classmate Gertrude Lindsay describes his exotic Sallust’s House,
along the Riverside Road, with its “cinnamon-colored walls and yellow
frieze,” as suggesting “a foreign air”—much unlike a laborer’s rude cot-
tage and more, to Gertrude, “like a toy savings bank.”

Wary from the start, Miss Wilson, the headmistress, is further sus-
picious of Smilash once she recognizes through his absurdly phony
dialect “a scrap of Euclid.” When Miss Wilson offers Smilash all of
ninepence to roll the lawn, he offers his gratitude, praying: “May your
ladyship’s goodness sew up the hole which is in the pocket where I
carry my character, and which has caused me to lose it so frequent.
It is a bad place for men to keep their characters in; but such is the fashion.” He explains that “words don’t come natural” to him—that he has “more thoughts than words,” and that what words he summons up “don’t fit his thoughts.” Yet they do, and playing the fool with radical ideas beyond those of an unlettered laborer is a continuing risk that he cannot resist.

The classical slip is not Sallustian, but the Roman would resonate through Shaw’s writings. Smilash’s wry cynicism belying his pose apparently derives from Sallust. The christening of the cottage cannot be accidental. Rescued from beneath centuries of volcanic ash, and known in Shaw’s time, a House of Sallust survives, with portions of its frieze, in Pompeii, on the Via Domitiana. According to *The Buried Cities of Campania* (1872) by archaeologist W. H. Davenport Adams, the pages of which Shaw could have turned in the British Museum, the house and garden walls “are gaily painted ... with a whimsical frieze above,” and its stuccoed panels evidence, still, “different and strongly-contrasted colours.”

No Sallust, despite the uncanny echoes of the house in Pompeii, Smilash retorts loftily to the upper-class Gertrude, who claims to be “an unprotected girl” in a man’s world: “Why, you are fenced around and barred in with conventions, laws, and lies that would frighten the truth from the lips of any man whose faith ... was less strong than mine.” Sallust had written, succinctly: “The higher your station, the less your liberty.” Floodlighting his bizarre guise as “Smilash,” from which he is soon fully outed—undermined throughout by his witless frivolity—Trefusis turns the maxim into ponderous Marxism. Despite the plethora of paradoxes in *Capital* and associated writings, one would have to hunt hard to find any gaiety in Karl Marx.

It has long been assumed that Voltaire or La Rochefoucauld—the French refer to Sallust as the Roman Rochefoucauld—was behind Shaw’s ironic aphorisms in his plays, prefaces and especially the “Maxims for Revolutionists” pamphlet ostensibly by John Tanner in *Man and Superman*, whom Sidney Trefusis foreshadowed. Friedrich Nietzsche, already familiar to Shaw, had credited Sallust for his own epigrammatic bent: “My sense of style, for the epigram as a style, was awakened almost instantly when I came into contact with Sallust.” Nietzsche also praised the Roman political chronicler for his “cold sarcasm.”

“I am honest when well watched,” Smilash concedes, and in a foreshadowing of Alfred Doolittle of *Pygmalion*, agrees with a parson that overpaying him for a job would only set him drinking, and that less
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cash would keep him drunk until Sunday morning, which is all he requires before religion, and pub closings, intervene. Trefusis (or Smilash) seems to have read, in his *Sallust’s House* and earlier at Cambridge, the apothegms of Sallust, whose keen sense of sarcasm and anticlimax seems to have appealed to Shaw. Later characters who are in part spokespersons for G.B.S. continue to echo the paradoxical Sallust, who wrote: “Few prize honor more than money,” and “By the wicked the good conduct of others is always dreaded.” Or the wry “He that will be angry for anything will be angry for nothing,” and “To have the same desires and the same aversions is assuredly a firm bond of friendship.”

The G.B.S. who wrote in the preface to *Man and Superman* of “the true joy in life” as being used up in causes beyond one’s self appears to have read (with allowances for the translations he encountered) Sallust’s “He only may be truly said to live and enjoy his being who is engaged in some laudable pursuit, and acquires a name by some illustrious action, or useful art.” In “Maxims for Revolutionists,” an appendix to the play, appears the maxim: “Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.” Sallust in its counterpart had written: “Few men desire liberty. The majority are satisfied with a just master.”

One can imagine *The Devil’s Disciple* in Sallust’s “Those moved to tears by every word of a preacher are generally weak, and rascals when the feelings evaporate.” And *Arms and the Man*, where Captain Bluntschli comments about the inadvertent heroism of Major Sergius Saranoff suggests Sallust’s “In battle it is the cowards who run the most risk; bravery is a bulwark of defense.” The brazenly utopian ventures of Andrew Undershaft, the multi-millionaire armaments czar in *Major Barbara*, explained in his sharp paradoxes, are scorned by Lady Britomart, his scheming, estranged wife, as “That’s Andrew all over. He never does a proper thing without giving an improper reason for it.” The pithy Sallust had written, as noted earlier: “By the wicked the good conduct of others is always dreaded.” Undershaft had already built his industrial empire and green company towns for his workmen on a premise described in Sallust as “To someone seeking power, the poorest man is the most useful.”

In his *Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler recommended, perhaps thinking of *Major Barbara*, that Shaw, the “prime exponent of capitalistic socialism,” should “read Sallust on Catiline and Jugurtha.” Apparently Shaw already had. Samplings of Sallust after a perusal of Shaw suggest that G.B.S. himself dwelt, metaphorically, in *Sallust’s House.*