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W. Rösler: Diels, Griechische Philosophie. Hrsg. von Saltzwedel 115


Like Livy himself, David Levene (Le.) begins his monumental and revolutionary study by proclaiming the greatness of his subject: «Livy’s Third Decade … is the most remarkable and brilliant piece of sustained prose narrative in the whole surviving corpus of classical literature.» This opening is sure to win hearts among devotees of an author who has rarely been overpraised even by his best students. But claims to reveal underappreciated masterpieces also beg the question of why they are necessary at all. In Livy’s case, there is a cogent practical answer: to articulate his work’s distinctive qualities requires a canvas almost as broad as the historian’s own. Synoptic studies of features of his history – characterization, use of sources, religious attitude – run up against the variety of Livy’s approach, the
many exceptions that do not prove their rules. (If it aimed at nothing else, Le.’s work would merit praise simply for its patient exploration of how Livy continually confounds expectations.) By contrast, isolating individual episodes for close reading misses Livy’s large scale effects and, worse, inevitably severs thematic and contextual links that bind the part to the whole. The reason, then, that the exceptional qualities of this text have not been recognized is that they have lacked an exponent who combines a meticulous eye for narrative detail and a critical imagination, not to speak of a memory, capacious enough to re-arrange the big picture. Until now.

Le. divides his treatment into five sweeping chapters focusing respectively on the arrangement of material, Livy’s relationship to his predecessors, characterization, battle descriptions, and causality – all topics that seem almost too conventional. But Le.’s conclusions are anything but predictable. The first chapter highlights the tensions between the historic time frame within which events actually happened and a «narrative time» that re-interprets them by their mere re-positioning in the text. Le. draws on Denis Feeney’s recent arguments that ancient conceptions of time privileged synchronic relations over absolute chronology, but, as throughout the book, his aim is not to solve problems by histori-cizing our approach to them. Rather Le. argues that the alternative dating of the siege of Saguntum (21.15.3–6), to take one example, would raise as many ques-tions for an ancient reader as for a modern one, and was meant to.

The second chapter’s argument is implicit in its title, ‘Sources and Intertexts’. Rather than approach earlier historians of the Hannibalic War as ‘sources’ for the factual content of Livy’s work, who impinge directly on the reader’s consciousness mostly when Livy dissents from their authority, Le. shows conclusively that Livy engages with the details and very language of his most influential predeces-sor’s narrative to bring his own distinctive understanding of history into focus. While intertextuality is emerging as an important theme in historiographic re-search, Livy’s Third Decade presents an almost unparalleled opportunity to compare a narrative with an extant ‘source’, Polybius. But before he can get down to the work of comparison, Le. must first establish, against the influential thesis of Tränkle, that Livy was indeed using Polybius already in Book 21. These pages are a model of lucid argumentation and will be essential reading for anyone interested in Livy’s working methods, but Le. himself focuses on their literary consequences. Livy does not simply overwrite the Greek historian’s narrative; he continually signals his awareness of it. And the point of these allusions is to chal-lenge the rationalism that underlies Polybius’ understanding of events and vali-dates his approach to historiography.

The third and fourth chapter both return to the theme of inconsistency. By tracing the portrayal of select figures throughout the decade, Le. shows firsts how Livy’s characters lack the coherent internal motivations that would make them psychologically plausible as individuals in modern terms; more surpris-ingly, they also fail to conform to ancient rhetorical ideals of consistency. What emerges instead is a mosaic of different character types. Not only do individual characters behave differently as new historical contexts call to the fore different ‘personae’ (see the theory of four personae at Cic. Off. 1.107–116), but they com-bine in Livy’s text with opposite and complementary patterns of behavior to
further the didactic purpose of the work, the selection and modification of models of action in response to circumstances. What is true of individual figures also applies to the characterization of nationalities: ethnic stereotypes add to the range of available *persona* a character might plausibly adopt but are never made simplistically to determine action. They invite analysis rather than foreclosing it. Thus one of Le.’s test cases, Massinissa, sometimes appears as a faithful, young acolyte of Scipio, sometimes as a conventionally ardent Numidian, and sometimes as a foreigner with his own unfathomable dynastic agenda. His pairing with the disloyal Numidian Syphax aims at more than a traditional contrast between good and bad barbarian: by emphasizing areas of overlap as well as difference, the comparison reminds the reader that under certain circumstances loyalty can turn into treachery.

Livy’s malleable portrayal of character also effectively diminishes the role of personality as a mode of historical explanation: things do not happen simply because x was a person of a certain type. (This realization may come as an illuminating surprise after Livy seemingly locates the origins of the war in the tragic obsessions of the Barcid dynasty.) The question of why things do happen dominates the final two chapters of Le.’s analysis. We begin again on the small scale with Livy’s presentation of battles, a context which ought to give the clearest picture of how cause leads to effect. Yet as Le. shows, again through the kind of intertextual comparison justified in his second chapter, by contrast to Polybius, Livy often fails to specify why a battle is lost or won. And this is all the more surprising when he is recognizably evoking Polybian models. The details are the same, but they no longer have the same explanatory value. Le. accounts for this effect in part as a programmatic diminution of Polybian rationalism to suggest the importance of supernatural forces in Rome’s success or failure. But he is also pursuing a much more ambitious agenda.

To heighten the suspense, let us pause to take stock of what Le. has accomplished so far. In its broadest sense, Le.’s aim, as he suggests in an epigraph from *Die Meistersinger*, is to seek the «rules» for reading Livy. This exercise in explaining Livy on the basis of Livy, as a Homerist might put it, at first takes the traditional form of the ‘aims and methods’ approach. Even on these terms, however, Le.’s work is exceptional for its originality and breadth; he is emphatically a Sachs, not a Beckmesser. Some of the topics may seem familiar, but the terms of the discussion are not, and while fresh attention is given to old problems like the Saguntine chronology, Le. has a remarkable eye for drawing out the complexity of many passages in the Decade that have not been studied in proportion to their interest (his analysis of the Capua narrative, pp. 354–75, offers one sustained example). Breadth comes from Le.’s detailed knowledge of the ancient contexts of Livy’s writing but even more from his engagement with debates and approaches not specific to Livy or ancient historiography. Examples include his use of modern scholarship on battle narratives in chapter 4 or the wide reading that informs his discussion of character in chapter 3. Le.’s treatments of individual subjects, in short, serve his larger argument, but they are not enslaved to it, nor is their value restricted to the study of Livy. Anyone interested in ancient historical writing should read his chapters on narrative organization and intertextuality;
anyone interested in the representation of persons in ancient literature should read his chapter on characterization.

But the «rules» for reading Livy are more than a matter for empirical investigation. The pull between historical and literary priorities has made the legitimate parameters for analyzing any ancient historian’s work increasingly controversial. At one extreme, factual fundamentalists struggle to close the gap between historical texts and the reality they represent. At the other, radically literary approaches insist on the autonomy of textual effects – on a writer’s capacity to construct rather than represent reality, and on the difficulty, even impossibility, of telling the difference. Where does Le. stand in this debate and how does it inform his approach to Livy? On many issues, he stakes out an avowedly conservative position. Le. takes a strong view of authorial intention, rejecting the liberties opened up by reader-response oriented criticism. More subtly, he focuses his analysis on aspects of Livy’s work where even ‘fundamentalists’ will grant a measure of autonomy to the writer, such as the arrangement of his material. Far from insisting even on the measure of narrative embellishment that the now orthodox rhetorical approach of A. J. Woodman would permit, thanks to his method of reading Livy against Polybius, Le.’s most striking arguments are based on passages where Livy is following his sources most closely. This forecloses any fruitless debate on «das Livianische im Livius»; in these cases we know what Livy is working with and what he’s doing with it. As we shall see, Levene ultimately claims for Livy a bold and distinctive view of the control a writer can exert over his material – one that resembles in many respects post-modern insights about the writing of history. But because he builds the theory from his textual observations, rather than vice versa, his work is more likely to change minds than polarize debate. At the very least, scholars who will reject the «radical» models of historiography on a priori theoretical grounds will not have these arguments available to them here.

But the same insistence on authorial agency that distances Le.’s analyses from extreme textualism also exposes him to challenges from traditional historiographic perspectives, which are themselves prone to restrict the role of the author, for different reasons. Inconsistency can be the sign of writer out of control of his material as well of his subtle manipulation of it. And the accusations of historiographic inadequacy which echo so loudly in the legacy of Livian scholarship may make this a seductive explanation. Do Livy’s portraits of individual characters deliberately fail to conform to expectations, or do they result from the difficulty of applying restrictive norms of plausibility to the varied actions that make up history over the long haul of the Second Punic War? Authentic historical actors just are more complex than the consistent abstractions demanded by rhetorical theory. But with nothing else in his tool box, Livy contracts rather than expanding the horizons of his ethopoeia. When the circumstances call for a rash commander, he produces a rash commander, and if events later put the same individual in the role of a wise counselor, well so be it. Similarly in the case of battle narratives, perhaps his failure to identify particular strategic causes for victory or defeat when they are set out by Polybius results from lack of interest or attention or from different narrative priorities. Le. defends Livy against such potential charges of incompetence through the telling observation that these
inconsistencies are not uniform features of Livy’s text. The historian does know how to explain military action carefully at the strategic level. The fact that Livy can write in ways that make sense to an ancient audience confirms that when he does not it is a question of choice rather than ability.

So what then is Levene’s explanation? His analysis of battle narratives pointed towards a religious dimension in Livy’s presentation of the past as the reason why merely strategic considerations fail to add up to convincing causes. But the book’s final pages make clear that Le.’s argument throughout has been more literary than ideological. It addresses the qualities and capacities of Livy’s text rather than the beliefs of its author: Livy uses inconsistency not to undermine the plausibility of his narrative as an account of reality – reading Livy is not like reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – but nevertheless to highlight the power of that narrative to determine how the reader perceives reality.

Livy regularly writes … as if his text actually was a form of reality: that things are true simply in consequence of his having written them in a particular way. Livy literally has recreated the world of the past, one which may not – indeed, on his own account, sometimes manifestly does not – mirror consistently the past as it originally occurred, but which partially supersedes that with a reality of its own. Rome’s past literally is what Livy has made of it.” (p. 388)

The brilliant effect of this ending results in part from the masterfully dramatic construction of Le.’s argument, which comes together after 400 pages to reach this coherent yet unexpected conclusion. Avoiding theoretical sleights of hand, and making every point through careful and tightly assembled close reading, Le. in the end offers us a vision of Livy that not only justifies his initial claims about the work’s greatness, but, for all its qualifications, can stand with the most original and boldest re-imaginations of what ancient literature could do. From another perspective, Le.’s idea is also surprising because of how well it fits together with and affirms other trends in Livian scholarship, such as Gary Miles’ analysis of how the historian continually defers the moment at which his narrative can be based on fully reliable evidence. His conclusions will make sense, even prove recognizable, to scholars who have approached them by different means and while concentrating on different portions of Livy’s text. At least that was my experience. Best of all, Le.’s book ought to stimulate new readings of Livy on the small and large scale. Many passages will claim more attention thanks to his analyses. His overall thesis will challenge scholars to think again about other elements of the historian’s work and recognize Livy’s place among the great world-makers of Augustan culture.

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