

## REVIEW-DISCUSSION

D. S. Potter, *Literary Texts and the Roman Historian*. (Series: Approaching the Ancient World.) London and New York: Routledge. 1999. Pp. x + 218. £12.99 pb.

From the pre-publication advertisements of its title I had assumed that this book, to which I greatly looked forward, would include extended discussions of the major Roman historians. This assumption turns out to be false. There is nothing on Sallust and no detailed engagement with the text of Livy, Tacitus or (despite P.'s late-imperial interests) Ammianus. The reader is thus given no idea of what it is like to grapple with an episode written by any of these literary giants, who for the modern historian constitute basic sources. This seems a pity. Moreover, the facts that their writing is highly subtle and often difficult, and that their medium is an ancient and foreign language to which most modern students have no access, raise issues which P. chooses not to discuss. This seems a missed opportunity. Yet perhaps there are compensations in terms of breadth, since P. explains in his Introduction (1-4) that his subject is 'any text which has come down to us through the manuscript tradition' (the phrase 'the manuscript tradition' is repeated like a mantra throughout the book, e.g. 21, 23, 26, 32, 33, 60).

Chapter 1, 'Definitions' (5-19), begins with unhelpful remarks on Pliny's story of a dolphin (*Ep.* 9.33): for several reasons the reader would be much better advised to consult Sherwin-White's commentary, to which P. makes no reference. A discussion of 'postmodernism' follows: 'the definition of a theoretical position that is in and of itself [another favourite phrase, e.g. twice on p. 121] devoted to problematizing [the mis-spelling is repeated later in the same paragraph] definition as a culturally determined linguistic construct is a rather slippery business' (7). This is one of the more comprehensible sentences in a section which will only confuse those readers expecting the 'accessible and concise introduction' promised in the book's blurb.

The next section is devoted to the term *historia* and focusses on a famous passage (5.18.1-6) of Gellius, to whom P. refers familiarly as 'Aulus'. When we are told that 'a practitioner of *historia* such as Herodotus uses the verb much very much less frequently to describe his endeavors than he uses other verbs for acquiring information' (10), we have to think twice, not only to decide how to correct the programmatic misprint but also to ask ourselves which of the two previously mentioned verbs P. means. Latin-less readers will be puzzled by the rendering of the heading of *Noct. Att.* 3.7 as 'the *historia* about Quintus Caedicius ... is derived from works of history (*annales*)', especially since the phrase *annales nostri* is translated as 'our annals' in the next

paragraph, but they will be even more at sea when P. returns to Gellius on p. 109, where ‘The ... distinction ... between the *adnotationes* and the *commentarii*’ is meaningless without these terms’ being inserted into the English translation of the passage under discussion. When next (11) we are told that ‘A *historia*, or *annales*, for Aulus is a narrative of events, a definition that is certainly well within the range of his own usage of the words’, it is hard to see how he might have put forward a definition which was *not* within the range of his own usage of the words. Finally we are informed that ‘a *suggraphê* might also be a contract, bond, or a mark on the eye’. If baffled readers consult LSJ, they will find that these definitions have simply been lifted from the lexicon with the substitution (whether by another misprint or *varietatis causa* is unclear) of ‘on’ for ‘in’ in the third case, which turns out to be a reference to bloodshot eyes. I do not understand the relevance of this, except perhaps to the reader who attempts to come to terms with the mistakes which litter P.’s book.

The penultimate section concerns ‘Truth and history’. The famous fragment of Hecataeus is mistransliterated and evidently mistranslated (12), and we are told that Quintilian, whose work is abbreviated to ‘*Orat.*’ (n. 17), was ‘the premier teacher of rhetoric at the capitol’ (13) and that Plutarch believed in the importance of ‘the moral critereon’ (15). The statement that ‘it is a basic sign of his *kakoêthes* that he will offer some preliminary praise so as to give his accusations additional force’ ascribes straightforwardly to Herodotus (‘he’) what in Plutarch is a generalisation about τὸ κακοηθές. When P. quotes (16) perhaps the most famous expression in Tacitus’ *Annals*(I.1.3 ‘sine ira et studio, quorum causas procul habeo’) and translates the last four words as ‘I have distance from their affairs’, we may be sure that Goodyear, to whom he appeals in a note, did not so translate the words. As we come to the last section of this chapter on ‘definitions’, we may reflect that P. has not once mentioned the phrase *res gestae*.

The long second chapter (20-78) deals with ‘Texts’. By way of ‘Sorting things out’ (the title of the first section), P. thinks it useful to divide texts into three categories of his own devising: ‘participant’, ‘illustrative’ and ‘narrative’ (22). If these are intended to be mutually exclusive, as P. seems to imply, they cannot usefully be applied to much of ancient literature. Thus ‘An illustrative text tends to be a work that is written for the education and/or amusement of the reading public’; but ‘it can be restricted to texts that can neither be used as eyewitness accounts or narratives without straining credulity’. This, if I understand it correctly, seems at a stroke to disqualify most ancient historiography from consideration. Not much light is shed on the issue when each of the three categories is taken up in turn in the following sections. ‘Participant evidence’ (23-9) ranges through first-century A.D. poetry, Cicero’s speeches, and Ammianus. We are told that ‘Genuinely auto-

biographical lines in Statius or Ovid (as opposed to those constructed to suit a poetic persona) enable us to recreate careers in a milieu where evidence is otherwise scanty' (24), but we are offered neither guidance on how we might distinguish the genuine from the fictive nor any reference to e.g. J. Griffin, *Latin Poets and Roman Life*. P. experiences the greatest difficulty in giving references to Cicero's letters and to the edition thereof by Shackleton Bailey (whom he calls 'Shackleton-Bailey'): 'SB 410.5' should translate into *Att.* 16.5.5; *Att.* 2.1.3 is not 'SB 21.1' but 21.3; *Att.* 13.20.2 is not 'SB [!] 328' but 328.2; *Att.* 12.6a.1 not 'SB 243' but 243.1. When the reader is invited (n. 18) to compare *Att.* 3.12.2 with a passage of Fronto, the latter will be incomprehensible without a knowledge of Latin. A section on 'Publication and literary fashion' is now inserted (29-40). There is much on Galen, including a good remark on his modelling himself on his own construction of Hippocrates (30), but will P.'s intended readers understand a statement such as 'the ... *Hellenica Oxyrhynca* [the latter word and its cognates are mis-spelled throughout the book] is written on the back of a land register of the Arsinoite nome that was composed in the reign of Commodus' (33)? They certainly should not be given the unqualified statement that Livy began his preface 'with an hexameter' (38).

To illustrate 'Illustrative evidence' P. swoops from Cremutius Cordus via Gibbon to Marxist historiography to Bloch (whose first name is given as 'Mark' on p. 121) to Braudel to L. Stone, then back to Livy and Virgil (41-50). Many readers will find this bewildering. The section apparently devoted to explaining 'Narrative' (59-70) is nothing of the kind: it deals almost exclusively with the issues of fragmentary texts (or 'relicts', as P. refers to them) and includes a sub-section on Jacoby. A further sub-section treats 'Biography and horography'. Though P. deals with the lives of poets (67), there is no reference to the work of Fairweather or Lefkowitz; and, though he often feels it necessary to remind us that the literary world in antiquity was almost exclusively male (e.g. 22, 29, 42, but note the curious statement at 201 n. 1 that 'the ideal historian might even be a woman'), and though he seems to mock scholars in the 1930s who used 'his' and 'he' in a way which today is regarded as politically incorrect (127), his assertion that biographical subjects were 'always men, it seems' makes no allowance for Sappho. The rendering of Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.73.1 into English is such that its point is almost impossible to grasp.

P. finally turns to a section dealing expressly with 'Reconstructing fragmentary authors' (70-8):

Velleius Paterculus survived the Middle Ages in a single manuscript, and that is now lost, so we are dependent upon early printed editions and a late transcription for our entire knowledge of what he had to say.

Tacitus' historical works descend in two manuscripts, one for books 1-6, another for 11-16 and the surviving portions of the history. He provides some clues through cross-references as to what he had to say in some of the sections that we do not have, but not all. (70-1)

The first of these sentences, allegedly supported in a note by reference to M. Elefante's commentary on 'Vellius [*sic*] Paterculus', is false and misleading. For Velleius we are dependent upon a single printed edition, the *editio princeps* (P), which was published in 1521 and contains an appendix by Burer (B). Since the 'late transcription' seems to be contrasted with the 'manuscript ... that is now lost', P. must be referring to Amerbach's apograph (A) of 1516, which was unearthed by Orelli in the 1830s and is now in Basel; but A is not a transcription of the lost manuscript but of an earlier transcription (R) which was used also as the exemplar for P and is now itself lost.

The second of P.'s sentences, supported in a note by reference to the work of one 'R. J. Tarrent', is incomprehensible, since we are not told that the 'books' are those of the *Annals* and that 'the history' is the *Histories*. The third sentence, on cross-references, is supported (without mention of R. J. Starr, 'Cross-references in Roman prose', *AJP* 102 (1981) 431-7) by seven references to the text of the *Annals*. Three of these (1.13.2-3, 15.72.2 [which admittedly exhibits the verb *repetam*] and '15.73' [evidently a mistake for 15.74.2]) do not exemplify cross-references at all. Two others ('1.35', unaccountably listed last and in any case a mistake for 1.32.2, and 4.31, summarised as 'the carer of Suillius under Claudius') illustrate foreshadowing. Thus only 4.71.1 and 11.11.1 are genuinely cross-references, though P. omits to say that the latter is to the *Histories*. To turn from this to the Constantinian *Excerpta* is almost a relief, but P.'s statement that 'Each entry ... appears to be quite faithful to the original' seems flatly contradicted in the very next sentence, where we are told that it is 'hard to establish any general rule concerning the value of these texts as records of what was written by the original author' (73). The chapter is rounded off by a couple of helpful pages on Dio.

Chapter 3 is about 'Scholarship' (78-119): 'In what follows, we shall follow [a typical inelegance] the process of a classical historian from the search for evidence through the creation of a draft. It is a journey into the shadowy land of text and discourse' (81). We begin with 'Historians and records', on which P. takes a positive view: no mention here of the work of P. Culham or N. Purcell. We are told (82) that Tacitus 'plainly used' the *acta senatus* as a source: five passages of the *Annals* are cited in evidence, with the additional remark that 'the cases listed here should ... be sufficient to illustrate the point that Tacitus himself claims to have used them directly' (n.6). This, of course, is not so: only once, in the well known passage at the end of Book 15

(74.3), does Tacitus claim to have used the *acta* directly. Referring to Plin. *Ep.* 8.6 to support his case, P. assumes that in that letter Pliny is referring to a consultation of the *acta senatus*; but there seems nothing to justify that assumption: on the contrary, section 14 of the letter strongly implies that Pliny consulted a bronze inscription on public display in the middle of Rome. The translation of Tac. *Ann.* 3.19.2 *adeo maxima quaeque ambigua sunt* is given as ‘Many things are still ambiguous’ (93: evidently mistaking *adeo* for *adhuc*, and [?] *maxima* for *multa*), and *Ann.* 4.11.3 suffers a similar fate (95). A crucial paragraph on Tacitus’ annalistic arrangement (94) misrepresents the general stance of J. Ginsburg (who is everywhere called ‘Ginsberg’), is rendered largely incomprehensible by thoughtless language (to when does ‘at that time’ refer?), and falsely implies that Tacitus is only once explicit about his linking together of the foreign affairs of more than one year (since no reference is given, we cannot know which passage P. has in mind).

Under ‘Grammarians and historians’ (102-6) the story told about Galen on p. 104 seems at odds with the same story as told earlier on p. 38, and any relationship between the translation of Galen on the former page and the Greek quoted in n. 71 seems entirely accidental: P. begins the Greek two-thirds of the way through the passage in the middle of its last sentence and stops before the main verb of that sentence is reached; yet even this amputated relic contains a key phrase which he has contrived to omit from his translation. Under ‘The physical process’ (106-17) the statement that ‘There is no suggestion that he [the elder Pliny] wrote things down himself’ (109) will puzzle the reader of his nephew’s letter as translated two pages earlier, where the opposite appears to be the case. The reference to ‘*Tab. Siar.* Fr. b col. 2’ should be ‘II.b’, and the seeming dismissal of B. M. W. Knox’ famous article on reading methods (n. 81) appears premature in the light of A. K. Gavrilov and M. F. Burnyeat in *CQ* 47 (1997) 56-73 and 74-6.

Chapter 4, ‘Presentation’ (120-51), begins by heading off the startling possibility that Thuc. 1.22.4 might be interpreted as an approval of ‘bad writing’; and Jos. *Contra Ap.* 1.53-5 (P. mistakenly says ‘54-5’), which imitates Thucydides, is mistranslated and rendered into garbled English. A brief section on American historiography (121-2) introduces us to the name of Hayden White, whose ‘modes of employment’ (129, 218: ‘emplotment’ is meant) are described later (128-9) and for whose work I am said (n. 1) to have written ‘a manifesto’ in *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (1988) 197-201. Now P. is, I suppose, quite entitled to ignore my discussion of Cic. *De Or.* 2.62, as he does on p. 12 (where the reference is wrongly given as ‘2.63’); equally he is entitled to try to argue against it, as on pp. 135-8 below; but my analysis of the Ciceronian passage was written without any reference to White whatsoever, as my notes demonstrate, and my references to White on pp. 197-201 of my book are clearly (as I think) designed to suggest common ground be-

tween his position and that of Dover and Brunt and to use that common ground as a foil for *distinguishing* my own position from both (as explicitly stated on p. 199). This scarcely seems to me to amount to a ‘manifesto’.

There follows a section on Ranke, the title of whose first book is rendered in English as *Histories of the Roman and Germanic Peoples, 1494-1514* (123), although earlier (103) it was given as *History of the Roman and Germanic Peoples from 1494-1535*, while the German title is given as *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494-1535* (190 n. 66, 194 n. 12). None of these attempted versions is correct. After a further section on ‘Objectivism and relativism’ (126-30), P. has two more entitled ‘Fact and presentation’. The first (130-5) deals with Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Lucian (the reference to Tac. *Ann.* 1.2 should be 1.1.2), the second (135-8) with Cicero. P. translates *De Or.* 2.63 and begins it with the words ‘The nature of events’ (*rerum ratio*); he does not translate 2.64 but remarks that ‘The nature of style and form of discourse is to be diffuse and full’ and then adds: ‘The critical feature of Cicero’s discussion is the separation between the nature of events and the nature of style’. In a note he quotes 2.62-4 as a whole in Latin and then says that his own translation of 2.63 ‘differs significantly’ from that offered by me in *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*: ‘The subject of the sentence is *ratio*, which Woodman’s rather more eloquent rendition obscures. The point is important since Cicero is explicitly contrasting two different *rationes*’. Though I admit I began my translation of 2.63 with ‘It is in the nature of content’ and that of 2.64 with ‘The nature of style and type of discourse’ (which P. has simply copied, changing ‘type’ to ‘form’), I tried to indicate the parallelism of the two phrases in question by repeating the expression ‘the nature of’ (contrast e.g. the Loeb); moreover, in my quotation of the Latin (which I, unlike P., did not relegate to an end-note), I used superscript numerals to show that *ratio* at 2.63 is picked up by *ratio* at 2.64. Readers may therefore judge for themselves whether I ‘obscured’ anything. Unfortunately, however, P. is scarcely in a position to complain about someone else’s version since his own translation of the passage contains at least two bad obscurities (‘something to be said about the plans that the writer approves’ and ‘...that all the reasons be explored, whether by chance, design or rashness’), as well as the usual profusion of mistakes: *regionum descriptionem* is rendered as ‘the description of events’, the phrase *memoriaque dignis* is omitted altogether, and the translation of *qui fama ac nomine excellant* has been transposed from one colon to another. None of this inspires much confidence; and, by translating *rerum ratio* as ‘The nature of events’, a matter on which he lays much stress, P. to my mind misinterprets the passage as a whole.

P. next passes to ‘Other forms of presentation: chronicles and chronographies’ (138-44) and ‘Verisimilitude’ (144-50), where he refers to the *Historia Augusta* and remarks that ‘It is as if the author deliberately invokes the

apparatus of scholarship to mark his fictions'; but nowhere in the book are we told why similar arguments about 'the stylistic furniture of veracity' may not be applied to (say) Livy or Tacitus. After a brief 'Epilogue' (152-5) P. adds an Appendix on 'classical authors discussed in the text', together with editions and translations of their works in most cases. Some of the entries are extraordinarily banal: of Virgil it is said that 'his surviving works include the *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*' (it is just as well that Homer is not listed, for we should doubtless have been told that his surviving works include the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*). And surely it would have been more helpful to provide a selection of commentaries rather than references to austere Teubners or OCTs.

The Appendix is followed by thirty-five pages of end-notes, from which the following is a selection of mistakes: 170 n. 18 'Fabius Pictor Fr. 3: *quod nimirum in Fabi Pictoris annalibus eius*': no hint that this is from Peter's edition (only Jacoby is cited in the Appendix), and, apart from the misprint, *Graecis* has been omitted before *annalibus*, and *modi* after *eius* (thereby rendering the Latin unintelligible); 171 n. 24 'Mart. Carp' is presumably 'Mart. Cap.'; 172 n. 30 for 'Reynolds' read 'Maurenbrecher', since the former, while retaining the latter's numeration, re-orders the fragments; 175 n. 31 for 'JHS 101' read '111'; 176 n. 45 ends thus:

For the distinction...see B. W. Frier, *Libri Annales Pontificorum Maximorum: The Orgins of the Annalistic Tradition* (Rome, 1979), 247-9 (including suggestions on Indian cuisine). For other autographs, these in the first century see Plin. *NH* 13.83. For deluxe editions of antiquity in the second century AD see also Luc. *Ind.* 2.

*Pontificorum* recurs at 201 n. 5; I can see no Indian cuisine in Frier; the penultimate sentence is complete nonsense; and any reader baffled by 'Luc. *Ind.* 2' will not be enlightened by 177 n. 65, where the author is given as 'Lucan'. At 177 n. 59 I do not understand how one can have a 'pre-Homeric editor of Homer' (P.'s reference to Pfeiffer suggests that 'pre-Hellenistic' is meant); 178 n. 84 the sub-title of Cobb's book is not *French Popular Protest 1989-1820*; 181 n. 128 the names of Toher and Raaflaub should be transposed.

Scholars are routinely deprived of the full initials by which they are known (e.g. 'R. Kaster', 'F. Walbank'); others are given an extra initial to which they are not entitled ('R. H. M. Martin') or the wrong initial altogether (at 189 n. 42 for 'E. Birley' read 'A. R. Birley'); and frequently surnames are simply wrong, e.g. 'Gould' (164, for Goold); 'Carduans', 'Helleguarc'h' (166); 'Wheeler' (171, 172, for Wheeldon); 'Shellhase' (176, for Schellhase); 'Huebeck' (177); 'Hobsbawn' (179, thrice); 'Windschutte' (179, for Windschuttle); 'Mosshamer' (198, for Mosshammer).

Readers will find it almost impossible to follow any thesis put forward in this book because they will be repeatedly distracted by the horrors in its presentation, of which a truer picture than I have yet given may be inferred from this further list: 3 ‘principle’ (for ‘principal’, but ‘principal’ for ‘principle’ at 133); 33 ‘*Epitropontes*’; 68 ‘Hellenicus’; 72 ‘ommissions’; 81 ‘varient’; 89 ‘proceedure’; 93 ‘Maximus’ (for Maximinus); 96 ‘Deuternomy’ (but a better shot than ‘Deutornomist’ at 189 n. 46); 130 ‘descendents’; 134 ‘absense’, ‘*pramatikē*’; 169 n. 6 ‘Capitolism’; 171 n. 22 ‘Geschictsschreibung’ (this, like ‘Geschicte’, is universal); 171 n. 24 ‘Gleiderung’ (again n. 25); 171 n. 25 ‘Wunderzählung’, ‘Scolia’ (for Scholia); 175 n. 25 ‘zeitgenönnischen’; 176 n. 51 ‘Politiucal’; 177 n. 59 ‘Entrentiens Foundation Hardt’ (again at 191 n. 68); 181 n. 121 ‘drunkeness’; 182 n. 137 ‘interpretes’; 182 n. 148 ‘Hieronymous’ (twice); 183 n. 56 ‘grieschischen’; 188 n. 40 ‘The Annal of Tacitus’; 191 n. 71 ‘crtitical’; 191 n. 73 ‘criterea’; 192 n. 90 ‘versud’ (for ‘versus’); 192 n. 92 ‘Schiftstellern’ (twice); 193 n. 3 ‘Ecits’ (for ‘Ecrits’, twice); 197 n. 64 ‘Inscriften’ (again 198 n. 65, 201 n. 1); 198 n. 70 ‘millenium’; 199 n. 78 ‘Macereta’ (twice again in n. 80); 199 n. 80 ‘Septimus Severus’; 200 n. 82 ‘preceed’; 214 ‘strenographic’. Time and again sentences have words erroneously inserted or erroneously omitted; singular verbs follow plural subjects, and singular subjects have plural verbs; one sentence (53) has a participle instead of a main verb. The presence or absence of commas is entirely arbitrary, on countless occasions rendering a sentence meaningless, while punctuation in general is often random, inconsistent and wrong (at 197 n. 62 three successive references begin with full stops). The style is often deeply inelegant (e.g. 11 ‘the complex of meanings ... is complex’, 88 ‘The early third century AD may represent a low point ..., representing a rather interesting shift in standards’, 183 n. 156 ‘For discussion ... of Jacoby’s discussion on...’), ungrammatical (e.g. 63 ‘whom he says lived’, 99 ‘Possibly stemming from Ctesias’ authority as an eyewitness ..., Assyria came into the western tradition as the first great empire’), and strewn with slang (e.g. 62 ‘a bit odd’, 85 ‘pretty much’). There is no consistency at all either in the trans-literation of Greek (sometimes long vowels are marked, sometimes not) or in the presentation of references both to ancient authors or texts and to works of modern scholarship. I dread to think what further horrors may lurk in the Bibliography and Index, which I could not bring myself to view, but I notice that in the latter ‘Ammianus’ is placed after four entries dealing with ‘*annales*’.

What I fail to understand is how a book can reach the bookshop in this wretched state. All authors make mistakes, but they hope that most of them will be eliminated by some friendly reader and by a copy-editor; and, though the production process itself might introduce some new errors, one hopes that these and any residual mistakes will be spotted at proof stage. P.’s book boasts a puff from an eminent Oxford historian (‘The work is distin-



guished by the breadth and depth of Potter's knowledge of the material (both ancient and modern) and by the power of the intellect that has organized so much into something so coherent'), while the author in his preface thanks, *inter alios*, a Routledge referee, a collegial reader (who 'read through the whole text with extraordinary care, correcting countless lapses of style and taste, improving virtually every page') and a copy-editor. Yet it seems impossible that any of these individuals can actually have read the book. We expect fellow scholars to eradicate at least the more elementary of one's mis-translations and factual errors, and we are entitled to expect that one's copy-editor and production team will eliminate mis-spellings and will do the rest of their jobs with at least a moderate competence. None of this has happened in the case of this book.

This book belongs to a series entitled 'Approaching the Ancient World'. According to the aims as set out on the inside front page, the series is intended to provide 'an introduction' to and 'special training' for the problems and methods involved in the study of ancient history. These aims are desirable and admirable, but their very expression simply underlines the degree to which this book falls short of them. What this book does is set before students, undergraduate and graduate alike, the worst possible examples of bad practice of every kind. How can we hope to encourage, stimulate and teach students when we offer them products which fall so far short of even modest standards of scholarly presentation?

To add insult to injury, my copy of this book started to come apart at the seams by p. 10.

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