

REVIEW

TIME, NARRATIVE, AND LITERATURE

Duncan F. Kennedy, *Antiquity and the Meanings of Time: A Philosophy of Ancient and Modern Literature*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014. Pp. xii + 272. Paperback, £17.99/\$29.00. ISBN 978-1-84511-815-7.

The exploration of temporality in antiquity has only lately begun to reap the benefits of attention from scholars working outside of philosophy. In his latest monograph Duncan Kennedy (henceforth K.) fills an important gap by producing a work on the subject that is impressive for its breadth and interdisciplinarity. Foregoing a comprehensive, transhistorical definition of temporality, K. instead sets out a broad mandate to examine the way in which narrative raises questions about temporality. In a preface and five chapters, he moves through an ambitious range of genres and canonical texts: Augustine's *Confessions*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Livy's *History of Rome*, and Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, with each in turn serving as the focal point for reflection on ancient and modern debates on time and narrative. As one might expect from K.'s earlier scholarship, theoretical approaches are even more diverse, ranging from Ricoeur to Barthes, Culler, Derrida, Fukuyama, Borges, Koselleck, and Carr, to name but a few. In line with the aim of the *New Directions in Classics Series*, which K. co-edits, the book targets a wide readership. Individual arguments on select passages are often persuasive; however, the program of covering both ancient and modern conceptions of temporality falls victim to its own efforts at exhaustiveness, and while scholars may yearn for more focused, detailed analyses, *Antiquity and the Meanings of Time* marches onward.

In his first chapter, 'Does Augustine Put his Finger on Time?', K. flags the importance of issues of textuality and interpretation in the configuration of the human understanding of time. Augustine's *Confessions* dramatize the bishop's understanding of the human condition by 'creating a multiplicity of perspectives which juxtapose differing degrees of knowledge' (36). This is evident in the division in temporality that the autobiographical 'narrating self' and 'narrated self' generates, which is powerfully unpacked in relation to Augustine's famous transformation in the garden in Milan.¹ Effective too is the analysis of

¹ For the dueling perspectives of experience and teleology, see above all J. Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography. 'Futures Past' from Herodotus to Augustine* (Cambridge, 2013).

Augustine's use of apostrophe as a means of transcending the two forms of temporality, fashioning the text itself as an event with its own distinctive temporality. I found less persuasive the argument that textuality, and reading in particular, is key for Augustine's understanding of time (30–3). As K. himself notes (33), the examples (11.27.35–6, 28.38, 30.41) are all concerned with the enunciation of memorized sounds rather than with the reading of a text. If memory and textuality are to be collapsed, additional argument is needed to justify this.

Innovatively, K. will frequently depart from a historicist methodology to interweave modern theoretical approaches to temporality and juxtapose these with the *Confessions*. For example, Augustine's dismissal of pointing is considered 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' (13) and it leads to a surprising digression on the power of pointing as derived from the non-academic, non-specialist work of Raymond Tallis on the index finger. Relying on Tallis' conclusions on pointing as the displacement of the subject, K. then applies this to Augustine's 'conversion' scene; however, K.'s assimilation of the physical, embodied act of pointing to the *narration* of pointing in the *Confessions* does not wholly persuade. At the close of the chapter, the comparison of Roland Barthes' theory of the intentionality of the preterite and the function of authorship to that found in the *Confessions* similarly propels the ambitions of the book well beyond a historicist study of time and narrative in antiquity. Instead, K. treats Augustine as an interlocutor in current debates on narrative and temporality.

Chapter Two, 'Time for History', turns from the split temporality of the individual to examine Virgil's *Aeneid* and its portrayal of humans trapped in time, with its attendant uncertainty and contingency, and the divine who have transcended time. In the first part of the chapter, K. provides an introduction to narratology, using it to assess the limited temporal perspectives of Aeneas and the epic narrator in comparison with that of Jupiter. Here, K. argues much more persuasively for the textualization of fate and history. The argument then pivots abruptly to the question of the priority of 'story' or 'discourse', with brief forays into Platonic metaphysics and a return to Barthes. The departure from a philological analysis to the metaphysics of narrative is not an easy one. While this debate *is* a concern for philosophers of narrative, I cannot help but feel that K.'s erudition here exceeds the space he devotes to this unwieldy issue. The second half of the chapter turns to Virgil's *imperium sine fine* and connects it to a plot-driven, teleological vision of human action. Polybius' *Histories* are introduced as the 'application of the Aristotelian form to the past' (63), with K. interpreting his work as emplotted with a clear *telos* of Roman success. Modern scholars of Polybius are unlikely to find this reading plausible, given the historian's references to the decline of all states (6.9.10–14, 51.4–5, 57.1–4) and to the capricious nature of *tyche* (already at 1.1.2). Francis

Fukuyama and his controversial ‘end of history’ serve as the modern analogue to ancient determinist narrators such as Virgil and Polybius, and lead K. into the afterlife of Rome’s sense of an end to history by looking at the reception of Virgil’s perpetual Roman *imperium*, a modality with an influential afterlife as K. demonstrates, touching briefly on Augustine, Henry James, George Orwell, and the post-Marxist thinkers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

Chapter Three, ‘Determination’, continues this exploration of time and narrative by assessing the ‘open’ contingency of character-time and the ‘closed’ determinism of the prophet’s-time (or that of the audience), drawing upon the ancient text most obviously associated with contingent versus fated temporality, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Using Gary Saul Morson’s arguments on the emplotment and teleology inherent in the structure of narrative and the opposing lack of plot in ‘real’ time, K. further develops the previous chapters’ discussions of experiential and retrospective time in the tragic text. To resolve the impasse between these two focalizations, K. appropriately argues for a flexible ‘economy of free will and determinism’ where contingency and fate coexist. K. then explores the power of deconstructive criticism, rehearsing Sandor Goodhart’s reading of Sophocles’ play, which eccentrically argued for Oedipus’ lack of responsibility in the murder of Laius. Succumbing to the enticement of narrative closure rather than focusing on the many confusions operating in the background, Oedipus (and the audience) on this reading feels the gravitational pull of tradition and absorbs the guilt that he is typically associated with. Who killed Laius remains questionable at the play’s end, in a dramatization of Oedipus’ contingent and then ultimately self-imposed deterministic temporality. Few readers will find Goodhart exemplifies the best of such readings, but, more pertinently, I am not convinced that he does much work for our understanding of temporality in Sophocles’ play.

The fourth chapter, ‘Self-Determination’, will perhaps be of most interest to historiographers, as K. turns to historical texts, and Livy’s *History of Rome* in particular, to illustrate the effect of the divide in (teleological) narratorial and (contingent) character focalization of events. Scholars following the work of Jonas Grethlein will be sympathetic to such readings, though the latter exemplifies a more meticulous, philologically focused reading rather than the almost poetic meditation of K. To each her own. For K., historical narrators are noteworthy for their use of counterfactuals to break with historiography’s teleological inclination. K. focuses on Livy’s description of the events surrounding the disaster at the Caudine Forks and on his use of counterfactual history in shaping Rome’s hypothetical victory over Alexander the Great. Individual argument here can test credulity—as for example, when K. uses a similar counterfactual on Alexander from a speech of Appius Claudius Caecus in Plutarch’s *Life of Pyrrhus* as a potentially accurate reflection of third century rhetorical *topoi*. Notwithstanding his ‘if correctly reported’ (130), this is a stretch. There

are also surprising moments, as when K. ponders whether counterfactuals precede Livy in the tradition of historiography (135). As K. observes, Herodotus does not often engage in counterfactual history, but it should not be neglected that his successor, Thucydides, does so repeatedly.²

In the second half of the chapter, K. turns largely away from Classical texts and scholarship to examine more broadly the status of the self in narrative. He does so first by introducing Galen Strawson's thesis that humans can be divided into 'Episodic' (a presentist modality, experiencing only the 'now') and 'Diachronic' (a historical modality, with a sense of past and future) temporal beings. This thesis is then critiqued in an analysis of Borges' short story, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', whose protagonist appears as 'Episodic' and 'Diachronic' at differing moments. A further challenge to this stark distinction is made by way of an introduction to Heidegger's formidable metaphysics of time in *Being and Time*. Heidegger's Being is a narratively structured one and so imperils Strawson's theory of the apparently atemporal modality of the 'Episodic' self.

Chapter Five, 'Time, Knowledge, and Truth', begins by arguing that Aristotle's incipit in the *Physics*, his treatise on nature, is mischievously similar to the *Poetics*, prompting K. to see 'traces of the textualisation of "nature" already' (156) in the fourth century. The thematic and verbal resonances that he produces as evidence are, however, problematic. This is partly because, as Aristotle's incipit implies, many approaches necessitate treatment from beginnings or causes or elements, not simply that of nature. Additionally, even if these were meaningful contacts that K. identifies in the *Poetics* (and I am dubious), this should not lead one to assume the logical priority of 'narrative' over nature; couldn't the reverse as easily be true—that narrative is 'naturalized'? Might not birth and death have a logical priority over nature's beginnings and endings rather than narrative? K. transitions from Aristotle's unmoved mover in the *Physics* to Lucretius' Epicurus and the rejection of a demiurge for a theory of everything governed by atoms. It was a truth that transcended time and place though, we are reminded, it had its origins in Athens in the Hellenistic period. Lucretius is presented as a universalizing imperial narrator, who by his *translatio* offered up transhistorical truth in the form of the doctrine of Epicurus. In the final section he moves to a debate of the modern division in science studies over the totalizing or historically specific nature of truth and knowledge. Argument often moves paratactically. For example (174),

Lucretius' description of Epicurus as *princeps* ... refers of course to his role as the one who was the 'first' to discover the theory with which his

² For a recent treatment, R. Tordoff, 'Counterfactual History and Thucydides', in V. Wohl, ed., *Probabilities, Counterfactuals and Hypotheticals in Ancient Greek Thought* (Cambridge, 2014) 101–21.

name is associated. The infinite universe of Epicurean theory, without boundaries of time and space, finds its explanatory closure in the indivisible atom, which Lucretius calls *principium*, the thing that occupies first place. A similarly unbounded universal empire a generation after Lucretius finds its rationale in the figure of an ‘individual’—not a particular individual ... but one who adopted as his preferred appellation the term *princeps* ...

This lateral reasoning is ubiquitous to K.’s study and will doubtless spur future research.

K.’s ambition to introduce the study of narrative and temporality in antiquity to modern theoretical discussion is admirable, and he has largely succeeded. A conclusion, however, summarizing his contribution in the monograph would not have gone amiss. And if in its execution each chapter only grazes the surface of important questions in both antiquity and its afterlife, K. nonetheless must be credited with demonstrating the validity of those questions, and not only for those interested in the study of time past.

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