

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Greek Postclassicism. By TIM WHITMARSH. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 278. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-520-27681-9.

Whitmarsh's Goodwin Award-winning "Adventures" lives up to its title: it is indeed a safari into some wild and woolly territory, including forays into some of the *least* canonical texts in an academic field—Classics—often obsessed with canonicity. Even the first paragraph includes a shot across the bow: for Whitmarsh, the notion of *postclassicism* requires us to "rethink classicist categories inherited from the nineteenth century" (1). Thus what might seem a book geared towards contemporary reception—"beyond" in terms of chronology—is really "beyond" in terms of *ideology*: how (and why) we've structured periods of the ancient world so that they seem to flow ineluctably from the previous to the next.

For Whitmarsh, one consequence of this sort of macronarrative is a marginalization (almost literal, here) of alternative voices and literatures: Jews, Christians, Egyptians, and "bad" (or to put it more economically, under-valued) poets. Indeed, Whitmarsh sees in poetry a more valuable entrance to politics than even prose: in poetry, the hoary tropes of "antiquity" are redeployed to cunning effect as poets renegotiate, though "traditional" verse, their power and privilege under new regimes. One value—though not necessarily *the* value—of studying the so-called Second Sophistic is thus to upend previously established "hierarchies of cultural value" (6) and to rethink how we periodize antiquity into neat categories and into more (or less!) privileged authors. Whitmarsh asks us, rather, to suspend inherited prejudices and to investigate, with fresh eyes, these upstart artists of 50 to 300 CE.

Of the fifteen essays that comprise the volume, ten are previously published (and here revised), but all contribute to Whitmarsh's overarching aim: to treat Second Sophistic thinkers as philosophers of a contested past and an uncertain future. The book itself is divided into three general arcs: on fiction and fictionality (particularly as touching upon Greek prose); on the cultural significance of both prose and poetry in changed political circumstances; and, in "Beyond the Second

Sophistic,” on the cultural poetics of Ezekiel’s *Exagoge* and on specifically Jewish receptions of previous Greek literature.

Whitmarsh’s tour through fictionality begins with “The Invention of Fiction,” a sustained critique of teleological accounts of the Imperial Greek novel. (Teleology is often the whipping-boy of this study.) Whitmarsh particularly targets narratives that privilege the importance of Hellenistic fiction over later Roman cultural considerations and which likewise over-emphasize the Greek-ness of the novel at the expense of non-Greek influences.

Subsequent chapters variously examine the consequences of Whitmarsh’s will-to-demolish, including a reconsideration of the narrative worlds of the so-called “Romances” (chapter 2); the interplay of theology, historicity, and fictionality in Euhemerus of Messene’s *Sacred Inscription* (chapter 3); and complementary accounts of the literary “I” and Lucius’ Ass (chapters 4 and 5). (This last features a terrific précis of *actor* and *auctor*, adapted from Winkler’s ground-breaking narratological study of Apuleius (81–82)). Devotés of now-popular Philostratus will want to consult Whitmarsh’s chapter on *Heroicus*, which interweaves considerations of cultural identity with geography, genre (i.e. the *mise en scene* is “superpastoral” (108)), and, of course, fictionality.

Whitmarsh’s middle section, “Poetry and Prose,” examines the interplay of all things Greek and Roman, and his insightful, incisive chapter nine, on the Greek epigram, is a model of its type. At first it seems to be traveling along well-worn paths in its analysis of epigram as an essential component of the Roman system of patronage: poetry as potlatch. But it is a virtue of Whitmarsh’s scholarship that he states exactly what he’s arguing *against*, in this case both (1) a Bundy-influenced interpretation in which every aspect of a poem contributes to the praise of the *laudandus* and (2) deconstructive interpretations (*à la* Newlands) that emphasize rather the elements of covert criticism (148).¹ For Whitmarsh, both schools of interpretation ultimately flatten the complexity of Greek epigram, which triangulates as well the element of the consuming Greco-Roman public. In this way, it is (paradoxically) a public display of private gift-giving and thus a commentary on the relationship between Greek artists and Roman colonizers: who is really “gifting” culture to whom? Epigrams for close-reading include Antipater 2, Crinagoras 24, and the extremely weird Diodorus 1 (with its odd description of the “city of Remus”);

¹ Specifically cited in this context is Carole Newlands, *Statius’ Silvae and the Poetics of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

the chapter thus exemplifies Whitmarsh's style, which ricochets between complex theoretical constructs and detailed readings of individual passages.

The final arc of the study, on Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, and on Jewish writers grappling with Greek myth, makes good on the author's promise to consider Greek literary history from neglected viewpoints; in particular, Whitmarsh's examination of the fragmentary Hellenistic Greek tragedy *Exagoge* demonstrates that it is a peculiarly postcolonial artifact, one that reads the experience of urban Jews *through* an inherited form, and thus reflects what it means to be Greek, Egyptian, *and* Jewish all at once.

In general, Whitmarsh's study is composed in sophisticated prose with touches of personal passion ("That is teleological thinking of the most unhelpful kind" (35)), pop culture (such as the shout-out to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (33)) and even, on occasion, a penchant for introductory epigram ("Tragedy was big business in the Hellenistic era" (228)). Indeed, Whitmarsh's style is one of the especial pleasures of the volume: clearly he cares deeply about these non-canonical and often unloved works, and treats them with as much intelligence and care as he would (I presume) a Virgil or a Homer. In this way, Whitmarsh's study contributes not only to the study of the Second Sophistic but to the wider sphere of classical—or, as I've now learned to write—*postclassical* studies.

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