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BOOK REVIEW

Nox Philologiae: Aulus Gellius and the Fantasy of the Roman Library. By ERIK GUNDERSON. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. Pp. ix + 344. Cloth, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-299-22970-2.

Although this book is advertised as the work of Erik Gunderson (hereafter G.), the title page states that the true author is "Anonymous" and that his work has been "edited and with an introduction by Erik Gunderson." A "facsimile of the original title page" and a dedication to Domitius Insanus, the memorably outspoken grammarian of *Noctes Atticae* 18.7 follow. These three devices alert the reader that the subsequent pages contain more than an ordinary scholarly assessment of the legacy of Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*. Gellius has become an increasingly popular subject of study chiefly due to the work of Leofranc Holford-Strevens, whose classic *Aulus Gellius* (London, 1988) was republished in a revised and expanded form in 2003. G. has higher literary pretensions with his own study of ancient (and modern) antiquarianism, and he has infused his work with the spirit of Aulus Gellius. This is not meant to imply that G. has undertaken these devices for frivolous ends: his book is a more personal endeavor than the amusing literary games that the characters in the *Noctes* often play at table, and as G. examines Gellius' *Noctes* as "an autobiography of a life in books" (p. 14), he simultaneously recreates his own life in books and ruminates at length on what it means to be a classicist. G. shows that we are closer to Gellius than we think: "Antiquarians are all children of the book: even as they give birth to books, books also give birth to them" (p. 251).

The conceit of the *Nox Philologiae* (hereafter *Nox*) as a lost work recreated in the hands of G. is maintained throughout. As he states in the *Praefatio Editoris*: "Now that the first printing of this volume has long since become generally unavailable and is only to be found with some difficulty on the dustiest shelves of select antiquarian bookshops, the hour has perhaps arrived to make it broadly accessible once again for the benefit of contemporary readers." A dusty book given new life by a scholar is a trope common in Gellius and familiar in modern scholarship, and G. has subjected his own scholarship to this kind of distancing in order to shed more light on the relationship of Gellius to his own miscellany. Indeed, the problematic nature of authorship, both for antiquarian scholars like Gellius and for modern classicists writing about them, along with the strange self-identification and self-reflection between the writer, the reader and the excerpted author are the most prominent themes in the *Nox*, and G. has daringly chosen to weave them into the fabric of the work. As a result, the *Nox* itself is arranged and composed like P.K. Marshall's OCT edition of Gellius: separated into two volumes (*Tomus I* and *II*)

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composed of eight books (*Libri*), including a “Book Zero,” i.e. a list of the *capitula* of each book after the fashion of Gellius and Pliny the Elder in his encyclopedia. The indices occur not at the end of the *Nox* but as *Liber Quintus* at the end of *Tomus I*, i.e. in the middle of the book. And most significantly, G. has divided each “book” into sections with Latin *lemmata*, some of which he plucks from Gellius’ *Noctes*, although he has composed others himself. This is also the only book I have ever read that is itself listed in its bibliography—under “Anonymous,” of course—which G. has situated in its usual place at the end of the work, after the appendices and lists of *fragmenta adespota* and *fragmenta spuria*, which provide a bit of fun for both author and reader. Fans of Gellius will note with a smile that the *Liber Octavus* of G.’s *Nox* has been wholly lost except for its *lemmata*, just like the eighth book of Gellius’ original *Noctes*.

These distancing devices, coupled with the reflexive stance G. adopts towards his subject, cause reflections to pile up, so to speak, as in a hall of mirrors. For instance, there are no less than four prefaces in the *Nox*: the first (p. ix) is the *Praefatio Editoris* mentioned above, in which G., like Gellius, hopes that his readers will find something in Anonymous’ work to amuse and edify them (and perhaps to excerpt?); the second (pp. 5–7) provides the reader with a short introduction to ancient bibliophiles and antiquarians; in the third (pp. 8–17) G. expresses his intent to track “the circulation of knowledge” and “the competition of knowers” (p. 12) among Gellius, his friends and their sources and to explain what he believes the true nature of antiquarianism to be; and the fourth preface (pp. 18–44) finally tackles Gellius’ important but incomplete preface to the *Noctes*. This final preface on a preface, so to speak, consists of a detailed and indeed almost word-for-word analysis of Gellius’ preface, and I consider it one of the main strengths of the *Nox*.

The two “volumes” each have their own focus. In the first *Tomus* G. devotes individual chapters to each of the three main principles that guided ancient attitudes towards language: *auctoritas* (authority of “good” ancient authors), *ratio* (analysis by means of analogy or etymology) and *usus* (common use). *Liber Quartus*, subtitled “*Index Nominum vel Dramatis Personae*,” treats the major figures in Gellius’ work and life, from his larger than life idols like Favorinus, Taurus and Fronto, to the more mundane annoyances that intrude upon their learned society—the contentious grammarians and braggart youths who always receive their comeuppance but never merit a name in the *Noctes*. *Tomus II* is harder to characterize; it is a long meditation on books, reading and authorship both in Gellius’ milieu

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and our own, which culminates in the *Liber Septimus*, wherein G. asserts in succession that Ennius (one of Gellius' favorite authors), Macrobius (whose *Saturnalia* reuses large portions of Gellius' work), Holford-Strevens and G. himself are all authors, in a way, of the *Noctes Atticae*. After G. traces the dizzying cycle of use and re-use of material, of authors who become readers and readers who become authors, of excerpting authors who are themselves excerpted in return, the modern reader emerges at the end with a sense of distant but real connection to the objects of his study.

I should caution that this book is not meant for the general audience, for although G. translates quoted passages of Gellius, he does not translate his *lemmata*, and numerous French and German passages throughout are likewise left untranslated. Readers unfamiliar with French cinema, Nietzsche and postmodern theory (especially the works of Derrida and Foucault) will feel adrift in *Tomus II* especially. G.'s enthusiasm for his subject is contagious, but he occasionally indulges in wordplay that obscures rather than elucidates his material. Furthermore, although G. shows a deep knowledge of the scholarship on Gellius, his criticisms are not always made in the same courteous fashion with which Gellius and his fellow learned companions conducted their banquets of letters, something G. is generous enough to admit.

All this is presumably part of G.'s plan to shake the reader out of complacency. As he surveys the work of modern scholars on Gellius, G. criticizes their continued insistence on him as a fixed figure ("a somewhat simple man, in a bit over his head, affable but highly fallible"). For G. is intent upon rediscovering Gellius' "plural self" (p. 291) and showing how that self expands to fill the void between Gellius, his sources, his readers, his editors, his commentators, his adapters and so forth. G.'s *Nox* is a difficult book and will undoubtedly provoke strong reactions, but it is a thoughtful, scholarly work of many *noctes* that deserves to be read by anyone interested in Latin literature of the High Empire in general and Aulus Gellius in particular.

PATRICK HOGAN

Hope College