

REVIEW

UNCERTAINTY IN LIVY AND
VELLEIUS PATERCULUS

Annika Domainko, *Uncertainty in Livy and Velleius: Time, Hermeneutics and Roman Historiography*. Zetemata 154. Munich: Beck, 2018. Pp. 252. Paperback, €78.00. ISBN 978-3-406-72229-5.

This book approaches Roman historiography from a fresh perspective by investigating the narrative configuration of uncertainty in Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* and Velleius Paterculus’ *Roman History*. Annika Domainko (henceforth D.) defines uncertainty as ‘an existential experience bound to the way in which we perceive the world and our position in and interaction with it’ (21). The aim of the book is to shed light on the role that narrative (and, in particular, historical narrative) plays in helping humans cope with uncertainty, especially in moments of profound socio-political change.

D. first lays down the theoretical underpinnings of her investigation in the introduction (Ch. 1, 1–25) by building on a close reading of a famous episode in Livy (Hannibal’s speech to his troops before the battle of the Ticinus at 21.42–4) and then in the chapter entitled ‘Uncertainty in Context’ (Ch. 2, 26–62) on a more systematic basis. She distinguishes between two types of uncertainty: ‘temporal’ and ‘hermeneutic’. Temporal uncertainty is defined, with reference to phenomenology and historical anthropology, as arising ‘from the tension between our experiences from the past and expectations towards an open and undecided future’ (21). Drawing on deconstructionist and anthropological concepts of ambiguity, D. describes hermeneutic uncertainty as concerning the unstable meanings or interpretations of an event or situation. Both are understood as anthropological constants and as fundamentally entwined.

According to D., narrative can configure uncertainty of both types on the levels of the story-world and readers’ reception. In so doing, it helps readers cope with uncertainty ‘by outsourcing it into a “story-world” and approaching it by proxy, in a secure space without the constraints of the actual event’ (21).

The following two chapters deal with each of the historians under consideration. D.’s main argument is that, while Velleius’ *History* downplays uncertainty, Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* stages it openly. The former constructs the history of Rome as a teleological sequence of events, culminating in Tiberius’ reign. The latter invites readers to share in the perspective of historical agents, for whom the future was still open, and to negotiate their own interpretation

of events. At the same time, D. underlines that both closure and openness are present, to a certain degree, in both narratives (as in any narrative) and that the process of grappling with uncertainty happens precisely through the negotiation of both aspects.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Velleius' *History*. D. initially focuses on the chronological and narrative structure of the work as a means for effecting closure. By construing the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE as the major turning point in Roman history, Velleius does not present the advent of the Principate as a significant historical break; rather, it stresses the continuity between the Republic and the Augustan and Tiberian periods. At the same time, the 'synoptic' structure of the work as 'a narrative mosaic of biographies of outstanding men' (73) reinforces the ideas of continuity and teleology, in that it stresses 'trans-temporal patterns, values, and character traits' that run through Roman history (*ibid.*) and places Augustus and Tiberius within a series of great Roman men.

D.'s observations on Velleius' use of tense and voice are especially interesting. She points out the frequency of what she terms 'micro-prolepses', i.e., 'previews' of future events 'which assume the shape not of elaborate digressions, but rather very short glimpses into the future that are nevertheless significant enough to anticipate the outcome' (80). By this means, the narrative is developed in retrospect, from the historian's perspective. D. also stresses the rarity of voices other than of the primary narrator in the *History*—both on the intradiegetic level (characters' speeches) and on the extradiegetic one (mention and discussion of sources).

The last section of the chapter balances this overall assessment of Velleius Paterculus with the observation that uncertainty re-enters the *History* in the form of superhuman forces, such as fortune, fate, and the gods.

D. delivers a convincing interpretation of the *History*, which goes beyond the traditional notion of Velleius as a court propagandist and attempts to understand the implications of his work within the broader cultural and historical context of his time. She shows that, in a period that was rich in anxieties about the future of the Principate, Velleius provided an account that made sense of recent upheavals by presenting the course of history as stable and meaningful.

Livy is the subject of Chapter 4 ('Livy—Putting Uncertainty on Stage', 114–74), which is, in fact, a detailed close reading of one episode from the *Ab Urbe Condita*, viz. the account of the Roman defeat at the Caudine Forks in 321 BCE (Livy 9.1–15). D. defends her choice to focus on one paradigmatic account by pointing to the monumental size of Livy's work, which would make a comprehensive analysis—such as that carried out for Velleius—hardly possible. While this is true, I would still posit that a somewhat broader scope would have better suited the kind of far-reaching interpretation of Livy that D. proposes.

D. argues that the account of the Caudine Forks emphasises the gap between expectation and outcome on the levels of both the characters and the readers. As for the former, the use of internal focalisation invites readers to align themselves with the experience of the entrapped Romans who debate over the best course of action, feel fear and hope, and see their expectations thwarted.

As for the readers, D. argues that Livy's use of landscape evokes a different kind of expectation, which concerns the 'aesthetic dimension' of the account (125). Following a well-known article by Ruth Morello,¹ D. recognises elements of the *locus amoenus* in Livy's description of the grassy plain, enclosed by mountains, where the ambush of 321 BCE allegedly took place. According to this reading, such a topos evokes the expectation of a bucolic idyll, which is then contradicted by the subsequent ambush. The latter, however, is further complicated by 'subtle cues, scattered all over the description of the second, "idyllic" route to Luceria' that 'hint at the fact that the Romans are about to walk right into a trap, and ... subtly destabilize the sense of closure and security put forward by the bucolic idyll' (126). Among these, Livy hints at the 'narrowness of the place' and 'its limited accessibility' (*ibid.*).

D. is correct in showing that conventional landscape descriptions have a semantic value which a narrative can play upon in order to elicit expectations in its readers. The emphasis she places on the *locus amoenus*, however, should—in my opinion—be redressed. While the description of the Caudine Forks contains some elements of the *locus amoenus*, the dominant conventional type of landscape at work here seems to be another—namely, the narrow site of the ambush. The *Ab Urbe Condita* displays several instances of such a setting, all containing more or less the same topographic elements and standardised vocabulary.² Therefore, it is very unlikely that a reader of Book 9 would not have been immediately alerted to the imminent ambush when they read about the *saltus duo alti angusti silvosique* (Livy 9.2.7), or *angustiae* (9.2.8), through which the Romans had to pass (cf. *cavam rupem*, 9.2.9). Rather than seeing such expressions as scattered cues contradicting a dominant *locus amoenus*, I would suggest that one should recognise the clear hint Livy gives to his readers about the imminent ambush; at the same time, the evocation of a landscape that was by definition deceitful seems to further emphasise the theme of uncertainty and ambiguity.

D. goes on to investigate side-shadowing (i.e. the technique of 'draw[ing] attention to possible alternatives to main storylines', 140) as well as the

¹ R. Morello, 'Place and Road: Neglected Aspects of Livy 9, 1–19', in C. Deroux, ed., *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History XI* (Brussels, 2003) 290–307.

² For other examples of this *topos*, cf. e.g. Livy 7.34.1–2; 9.31.6–16; 27.46.6; 31.39.7–15; 38.41.5, 46.6–7; 39.20.6. For the conventional vocabulary used, cf. S. P. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy. Books VI–X, Volume 3: Book IX* (Oxford, 2005) 53–4.

polyphony created by the insertion of characters' speeches, and reads these techniques as markers of an open history which 'arises from the decisions of individuals' rather than being orientated towards a *telos* (132).

The chapter closes with interesting observations about the interplay of closure and openness in the account of the Caudine Forks. D. argues, for example, that both the beginning of the episode (with the narrator anticipating that the 'Caudine peace' will be 'famous for the Roman defeat', 9.1.1) and its ending (with the Roman reversal of the disaster and defeat of the Samnites; cf. esp. 9.15.8) provide the story with some degree of closure. She remarks, however, that uncertainty remains subtly present even with this sense of closure. Most notably, the account of the Roman recovery is followed by the famous 'Alexander digression' (9.17–19), one of the most striking examples of side-shadowing in Roman historiography. The account of the Roman victory is also undermined by the historian's own admission of uncertainty as to the actual commander of the army (9.15.9–11).

She concludes that the *Ab Urbe Condita* displays 'an idea of historical narratives as having the capacity to reproduce historical experience and, in their doing so, offer a playful way of guidance and orientation in a time of hermeneutic and temporal uncertainty' (174), such as the period between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate surely was.

Such a reassessment of the role of uncertainty in the *Ab Urbe Condita* is welcome because it allows a better understanding of some features of the work that have often led to scholarly debate, e.g., its incorporation of contrasting voices in a way that leaves the evaluation of events highly ambiguous or its complex approach to the veracity of sources. D. shows that the ambiguity implicit in such gestures is an integral part of the way the *Ab Urbe Condita* construes history as something which is open at every moment for human beings to shape and assess.

At the same time, her analysis might go too far in underplaying the role of closure in Livy. This might be a consequence of her choice to focus on the Caudine Forks alone—an episode in which the theme of error and deceit is paramount. Closing gestures that might have deserved more emphasis are, for example, the many prolepses scattered throughout the work through which Livy anticipates the outcome of events (there are a couple more in the account of the Caudine Forks, e.g. at 9.2.1, *non laeta magis quam uera uaticinatus*, and 9.12.1, *omnia quae deinde euenerunt*). Moreover, closure also seems to play a role in the narrative of the *Ab Urbe Condita* on a more general level. One need only be reminded of the many occasions in which political crisis is solved by the reaffirmation of Roman morality or by the Romans' reaction to adversity. One may mention, among many other examples, the Gallic Sack and the subsequent Roman recovery at the end of Book 5; the Second Punic War as recounted in the Third Decade; or the Bacchanalian Scandal in Book 39.

Episodes of this kind both display the dangers that constantly threaten the *res publica* and suggest ways to overcome them.

Chapter 5 ('Synopsis', 175–86) sums up by providing a comparative appraisal of Velleius and Livy's techniques for grappling with uncertainty. After briefly comparing the two historians' accounts of the only event which is reported by both narratives (the Roman victory at Pydna) D. develops some more general observations on the chronological macro-structures of their works. The annalistic time of the *Ab Urbe Condita*, which starts with the origins of Rome and proceeds into an open future, stands in contrast to Velleius' retrospective account of world history as orientated towards its Tiberian *telos*.

In Chapter 6 ('Epilogue', 187–212), D. concludes the investigation by suggesting some ways in which the interpretative grid developed in the book might be applied to Roman non-narrative literature (D. here focuses on Horace's *Epistles*) and to narratives in the contemporary political debate. A bibliography and index round off the volume.

The book is a stimulating read, which significantly contributes to our understanding of Velleius Paterculus and Livy, and anyone with an interest in ancient historiography (or narrative more generally) would benefit from reading it. The style is rather repetitive at times, but the points are made clearly and with nuance. The way in which the analysis of ancient texts is embedded within a broader meditation on the power of narratives in human approaches to reality is especially thought-provoking.

Università di Pavia

VIRGINIA FABRIZI
virginia.fabrizi@gmail.com