

Heinz-Günther Nesselrath: *Lukian von Samosata. Der Weg eines Syrrers ins Römische Reich und in die europäische Geisteswelt*. Baden-Baden: Georg Olms Verlag 2024 (Studienbücher Antike 20). 387 S. € 29.00. ISBN: 978-3-487-16653-7.

Heinz-Günther Nesselrath has written an inspiring new guide to Lucian of Samosata. I will begin my discussion of it at the very end of this extensive work. In a brief epilogue (pp. 332–335), the author reflects on the key qualities of his subject Lucian, characterizing him as a perspicacious truth-speaker, as someone who makes the reader think, as an intensely multi-faceted author, and, finally, as an empathetic person. In sum, Nesselrath writes, Lucian is “an attractive messenger from antiquity for our modern time” (“ein[...] attraktive[r] Botschafter der Antike für unsere heutige Zeit”, p. 335). It is for exactly this reason, which this reviewer wholeheartedly subscribes to, that both Lucian’s own works and Nesselrath’s introduction to them make for worthwhile and important reading.

The book has been published as part of the series “Studienbücher Antike” by Georg Olms Verlag, in which twenty volumes have appeared since 1998, including introductions to other authors like Herodotus and Tacitus, but also to broader topics like Latin declamation and slavery in the Greco-Roman world.¹ The series’ stated aim is to provide introductory works useful “not just” for classicists, but also for students and scholars working in other fields. “Lukian von Samosata. Der Weg eines Syrrers ins Römische Reich und in die europäische Geisteswelt” falls squarely within this specific remit. It is not popularizing for a general audience, but neither is it directed at Lucian scholars. The book would be most useful as a first point of entry for classicists, ancient historians, and researchers and educators in related fields unfamiliar with him and his works. Similarly, it would be a tremendous resource for an advanced undergraduate or graduate student embarking on a project about

1 Respectively: R. Bichler / R. Rollinger: *Herodot.* 4th edition. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2014 (Studienbücher Antike 3); S. Schmal: *Tacitus.* 4th edition. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2016 (Studienbücher Antike 14); S. Knoch: *Die lateinische Deklamation.* Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2021 (Studienbücher Antike 17); E. Herrmann-Otto: *Sklaverei und Freilassung in der griechisch-römischen Welt.* 3rd edition. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2018. (Studienbücher Antike 15).

or relating to Lucian. That being said, a motivated lay reader would find no real obstacles to enjoying and benefiting from this introduction either.²

The book consists of ten chapters in total, which, in keeping with the style of German academic monographs, are subdivided further into sections and subsections. A short preface (pp. 9–10) lays out the structure of the book. The first chapter (“Lukian und seine Zeit”, pp. 11–62) gives a brief outline of Lucian’s historical context and goes on to reconstruct his biography, to the extent that this is possible. The second chapter (“Lukian über seine eigene Kunst und ihre Quellen”, pp. 63–86) discusses four Lucianic works in which he appears to speak, in particular, to his own literary production. In the third chapter (“Ein vielfältiges Œuvre: Kurzer Überblick über Lukians Werk nach Gattungen”, pp. 87–103) Nesselrath offers an overview of Lucian’s oeuvre organized by genre. The fourth through eighth chapters, that is to say, the bulk of the book, offer discussions of Lucian’s works organized by theme. The ninth chapter treats the responses to and reception of the Lucian’s writings, from the second century CE up to and including the 1980s (“Ein viel und gern gelesener Autor: Lukians Rezeption von Galen bis Tutscholsky – und darüber hinaus”, pp. 295–331). The tenth chapter consists of the brief epilogue, which I already discussed, and is followed by several helpful bibliographies, an *index locorum*, and an *index rerum*. These are particularly useful, because some of Lucian’s works are discussed across several thematic chapters. Of the bibliographies especially the list of commentaries (pp. 337–339) is most welcome, also because a bibliography for Lucian still remains a desideratum among the generally invaluable “Oxford Bibliographies Online”.³

Nesselrath puts his methodological cards on the table right at the outset of the book. When he speaks of Lucian, he thinks of him as a real, historical person, whom one can get to know reasonably well by reading his works carefully. The author distances himself sharply from those researchers who

2 Barring, perhaps, the recurring use of the expression “Oxfordseiten”: a term used by classicists to refer to the number of pages a given work or passage takes up in the Oxford Classical Texts-edition, published by Oxford University Press, for the author.

3 One recent addition to this list, which appeared too late for Nesselrath to include and is referenced here solely as a service to the reader of this review, is: L. Bottenberg: *Friendship and Otherness in Lucian’s ‘Toxaris’*. A Literary Commentary. Berlin/New York 2025 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 162).

might reject his approach as “outdated” (“nicht mehr zeitgemäß”) because they “do not want to relate any of Lucian’s claims about himself to the reality of his person in any way” (“die keine von Lukians Selbstaussagen in irgendeinen realen Bezug zu seiner Person setzen möchten”), and he humorously labels such opponents as “Pant’-Aporetiker”, that is, everything-doubters (p. 9). The scholarly trend to read Lucian’s works as highly contrived, literary artifacts in which nothing can be taken at face value emerged in the 1980s, and has been prominent in recent years, but the question of the historical value of his works is an ongoing debate with active proponents on either side.⁴ In the course of the book Nesselrath does indeed generally identify Lucian’s authorial personae and alter egos closely with the historical Lucian, but he always retains a suitable measure of epistemic humility, acknowledging that there is little that we can know for certain about the man from Samosata. Because it is still such a contested issue, this reviewer would have liked to read more on Nesselrath’s interpretation of moments when Lucian inserts himself under his own name into entirely fantastical settings, like *True Histories*, or ones that seemingly have undergone much embellishment, like *Alexander or the False Prophet*.

The first and longest thematic chapter (pp. 104–186) deals with a wide array of works that are gathered under the umbrella “Lucian’s engagement with phenomena of contemporary *paideia*” (“Lukians Auseinandersetzung mit Phänomenen der zeitgenössischen Paideia”), meaning rhetoric and other forms of literary production, philosophy, and religious entrepreneurship. In this section Lucian’s unvarnished critical voice and his wit emerge powerfully. The next thematic chapter (“Götter, Schicksal und Orakel: Lukian und die metaphysische Komponente der Welt”, pp. 187–203) covers those pieces in which the gods take center stage, like *Tragic Zeus* and *Divine Assembly*, which in Nesselrath’s analysis together amount to a discrediting of the gods, leaving

4 A recent example of the more skeptical outlook (applied to Lucian alongside Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides) is I. Brodersen: *Das Spiel mit der Vergangenheit in der Zweiten Sophistik*. Stuttgart 2023 (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 86). A good overview of the debate with respect to Lucian and the underlying methodological problems is provided in S. Kidd: *Lucian on Reading, Performing, and the Difference. Living Life as Fiction*. London/New York 2025, pp. 1–21. Based on his comments (e.g. at pp. 23 n. 28, 32 n. 48, 33 n. 50) Nesselrath appears to have in mind as “Pant’-Aporetiker” especially M. Baumbach/P. von Möllendorff: *Ein literarischer Prometheus. Lukian aus Samosata und die Zweite Sophistik*. Heidelberg 2017.

humanity to fend for itself. In the following chapter (“Von armen Reichen und glücklichen Armen: Lukian und die soziale Frage”, pp. 204–224) the author turns to the question of the possibility of social engagement in Lucian, discussing *Cock*, *Downward Journey*, *Menippus*, *Timon*, *Saturnalia*, and *Dialogues of the Hetaerae*. He discerns some sympathy for the struggles of the poor, and links this, tentatively, to Lucian’s own modest family background. The next thematic chapter (“Von Griechen und Nichtgriechen: Gegensatz und Gleichberechtigung”, pp. 225–238) engages with the issue of (non-)Greekness in Lucian, focusing primarily on the Scythian pieces (*Anacharsis*, *Scythian*, *Toxaris*), and traces the persistent theme of virtue and wisdom existing among non-Greeks, too. The final thematic chapter („Durch unbekannte Welten bis ins Jenseits: Lukian als phantasievoller Erzähler”, pp. 239–294) treats Lucian’s skills as a creator of distant worlds through narrative: the afterlife, the heavens, and other exotic locales. The juxtaposition of seemingly disparate works here (*True Histories* alongside *Toxaris*, *Dialogues of the Dead*, and *Lover of Lies*) is remarkably productive, and readily justifies the chosen theme. All four of these chapters offer insightful and engaging accounts of Lucian’s works, that showcase his signature qualities, and are likely to stimulate Nesselrath’s readers to pick up the *Icaromenippus*, *Hermotimus*, or any other Lucianic piece. The book is at its best whenever Nesselrath zooms out to trace connections between different works, to contextualize Lucian in the ancient Greek literary canon, or to analyze the inner workings of his literary craftsmanship. In these chapters the balance between such analysis and summary of Lucian’s works is occasionally skewed towards the latter, and some readers may find themselves wanting more of the former in those moments.

A true standout in the book is the penultimate chapter (pp. 295–331) covering the afterlife of Lucian’s works. It is a rich and lucid account of the diverse cast of readers, translators, and imitators who were inspired by his oeuvre through the centuries, ranging from big names like Thomas More and Erasmus in the sixteenth century, to less familiar figures, like their contemporary Willibald Pirckheimer, who wielded his Lucian translations as weapons in intra-church polemics. Nesselrath lays out the fascinating trajectory of Lucian’s reputation, who was at times held up as a model moralist, at times reviled *and* hailed as a radical subversive. A helpful overview of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship on Lucian is also included, but, as mentioned, Nesselrath does not venture beyond the 1980s, other than to list recent commentaries and translations. A reason for this endpoint is not given,

but perhaps the author felt it too early to evaluate more recent trends. Tentatively, this reviewer would venture to suggest that the most vibrant areas of research in Lucian studies in the past decades have been his cultural, ethnic, and racial identity,⁵ the resonances of Roman (intellectual) life in his works,⁶ and his engagement with, and participation in the ancient Greek literary tradition.⁷

Nesselrath, drawing on over forty years of experience studying Lucian's work, has produced a phenomenally rich introduction in which the fruits of that labor are on full display. To think that someone who is just getting to know Lucian now has this book available to them as a guide frankly speaking

- 5 See: D. S. Richter: *Cosmopolis: Imagining Community in Late Classical Athens and the Early Roman Empire*. Oxford 2011, pp. 135–176; N. J. Andrade: *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*. Cambridge 2013 (*Greek Culture in the Roman World*), pp. 245–348; S. F. Derbew: *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*. Cambridge 2022, pp. 129–157. This footnote and notes 6 and 7 include only monographs (entirely or significantly) engaging with Lucian published since 1990, listed here as a service to the reader of this review. Nesselrath does reference the monographs of the 2000s on Lucian by Fabio Berdozzo and Karen ní Mheallaigh in the course of his discussion in earlier chapters, which is why I have omitted them from this list.
- 6 See: I. Lada-Richards: *Silent Eloquence. Lucian and Pantomime Dancing*. London 2007 (*Classical Literature and Society Series*); E. Bozia: *Lucian and His Roman Voices. Cultural Exchanges and Conflicts in the Late Roman Empire*. New York/London 2014 (*Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies* 19); A. Free: *Geschichtsschreibung als Paideia. Lukians Schrift "Wie man Geschichte schreiben soll" in der Bildungskultur des 2. Jhs. n. Chr.* Munich 2015 (*Vestigia* 69); D. F. Fields: *Frankness, Greek Culture, and the Roman Empire*. London 2021 (*Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies*), pp. 162–190; I. N. I. Kuin: *Lucian's Laughing Gods. Religion, Philosophy, and Popular Culture in the Roman East*. Ann Arbor, MI 2023; D. W. F. Stifler: *Lucian and the Atticists. Linguistic Satire in the Second Sophistic*. London 2025 (*Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographs*).
- 7 J. Ureña Bracero: *El diálogo de Luciano. Ejecución, naturaleza, y procedimientos de humor*. Amsterdam 1995 (*Classical and Byzantine Monographs* 31); A. Camerotto: *Le metamorfosi della parola. Studi sulla parodia in Luciano di Samosata*. Pisa 1998 (*Filologia e critica* 83); O. Karavas: *Lucien et la tragédie*. Berlin/New York 2005 (*Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte* 76); L. Kim: *Homer between History and Fiction in Imperial Greek Literature*. Cambridge 2010 (*Greek Culture in the Roman World*), pp. 140–174; A. Camerotto: *Gli occhi e la lingua della satira. Studi sull'eroe satirico in Luciano di Samosata*. Milan/Udine 2014 (*Classici contro* 2); A. Peterson: *Laughter on the Fringes. The Reception of Old Comedy in the Imperial Greek World*. Oxford/New York 2019, pp. 82–142; N. Bryant Kirkland: *Herodotus and Imperial Greek Literature. Criticism, Imitation, Reception*. Oxford/New York 2022, pp. 186–260.

inspires some jealousy in this reviewer – if only it had existed when I started out! – but much more so gratitude that the author has shared his vast expertise in such an accessible volume. Nesselrath's introduction is perfectly suited to inspire a new generation of Lucian scholars in Germany and beyond, and hopefully it will do just that.

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