This ambitious book by G. O. Hutchinson, which recalls his earlier bold effort in *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford 1988), has as its primary focus the aesthetic aspects of what is traditionally referred to as ‘silver age’ literature, a pejorative label that Hutchinson avoids using (something that even some of the self-styled new guard still cannot bring themselves to do). Hutchinson’s aim is ‘to excite or enhance [his readers’] enthusiasm’ for the literature of the early imperial period (p. 3). The chapters are organised around a treatment of aesthetic concerns and the themes of death and the gods. Hutchinson devotes his discussion mainly to the writings of Seneca and Tacitus, but devotes considerable space to Lucan and Statius, while Juvenal, Persius, Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus and especially Petronius are also treated. Hutchinson examines each writer of the period under each concern or theme. Chapters 1 (‘Conceptions of Genre: Criticism in Prose, “Lower” Poetry’) and 2 (‘Genre and Philosophy, History and High Poetry’) are complementary, each dealing with themes of ‘greatness’ and ‘reality’. Chapters 3 (‘Wit’), 4 (‘Extravagance’) and 5 (‘Structure and Cohesion’) cover all the genres. Chapters 6 (‘The Gods in Mythological Poetry’) and 7 (‘The Gods in Prose and in Lucan’) deal with the role of the gods, while chapters 8 (‘Death in Prose’) and 9 (‘Death in High Poetry’) deal with the theme of death.

Hutchinson is at his best in describing the aesthetic aspects of imperial literature and makes some astute observations on the styles of individual writers. As can be seen from the chapter titles, he employs the terms ‘high’ and ‘lower’ poetry to describe what he deems to be the ‘grander’ genres (epic, tragedy, philosophy and history) and the other genres (satire, epigram, elegy, etc.); this is unfortunate, since it suggests that some of these genres are more important than others. His themes of ‘greatness’ and ‘reality’, which he defines as ‘sublimity, grandeur’ and ‘truth’ respectively, escape ready understanding because of their vagueness and opacity, despite his attempts to explain them. ‘Wit’ as a title for chapter 3 seems inappropriate in the way that it is applied to particular contexts. When Tydeus, for instance, is driven mad by Tisiphone in the *Thebaid* (8.757f.) and is constrained to besmear himself with the brains and blood of Melanippus’ corpse (760f.), the snakes on the aegis of Minerva stand erect and shield her from the macabre spectacle (762-64), an incident that to Hutchinson contains ‘comic wit and invention’ (p. 93). ‘Extravagance’ as a title for chapter 4 seems equally inappropriate because it has been used by some modern scholars of imperial literature to suggest a peculiar affectation of style that is bathetic in its effects.

While Hutchinson’s positive approach toward the literature of the period is to be welcomed, the numerous laudatory epithets such as ‘brilliant’ and ‘exciting’ sometimes seem a substitute for close critical scrutiny of the text that takes account of its socio-cultural and ideological context. This lack of context is the most serious drawback of the book, since many of the texts that Hutchinson deals with are
political in their treatment of subject matter, yet he generally ignores these elements. While Hutchinson analyses heroic political death scenes from Tacitus (Otho in the Histories and Seneca in the Annals) and Seneca (Cato and anonymous heroes), he discounts the possibility of political influence upon other poets’ individual treatments of death.

Hutchinson makes little attempt to engage directly with the views of other critics or interact in any way with contemporary critical discourse. Although he is obviously aware of the work of other scholars, he does not indicate where and how he disagrees with them. As readers we have no way of knowing from what critical perspective Hutchinson is approaching his task. In addition, his prose style occasionally leaves the reader wondering if he has really said something meaningful. Here, for instance, is his opening remark on Valerius Flaccus in chapter 4 (p. 117):

Valerius [like Lucan] also cultivates extravagance persistently, but with somewhat less theatrical an air: he is not transforming history, and his play is more restricted in range. In Book iv he paints the ferocious boxing king Amycus in lavish colours; the lavishness is given point and tightness by the firm morality and the interconnections of language. But he also modifies it with wit and play, though less drastically and drily than Lucan; and he savours the extravagance with a certain detachment.

Does this description really heighten an aesthetic appreciation of the scene beyond that gained by a casual reading? Yet this is by no means the most obscure passage in the book. Another annoying stylistic aspect is Hutchinson’s attempt to bring the reader into his aesthetic framework through his frequent use of the royal pronoun ‘we’ and adjective ‘our’ (e.g., eight times on p. 40 alone).

This book will be widely consulted by scholars and students working in the area; however, its value will be limited mainly to promoting an aesthetic appreciation of the literature in the reader. Since even the most capable scholar and literary critic would find it difficult to possess the knowledge and expertise that are necessary to write a book that ranges competently across the vast, complex expanse of early imperial literature, this in itself is no mean achievement. Most progress in the area of imperial literature is likely to continue to take place as the result of critical investigations by individual scholars on particular themes or writers. In fact, since the examination of death, for instance, occupies the final two chapters and the discussion of Seneca and Tacitus dominates much of the book, it might have proven more profitable for Hutchinson to focus his energies on either this important theme or on these two literary figures, which Hutchinson describes as ‘the two greatest writers of Latin prose in our (or perhaps any) period’ (p. 40). The latter comment might well lead one to ask where this leaves Cicero, but such enthusiasm for the subject is heartening and the assessment perhaps not as unwarranted as it may first seem. This positive approach alone is a welcome corrective to much earlier criticism of imperial literature. Much remains to be done.

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