

Velleius Paterculus, Literary Critic and Generic Innovator

Few scholars have known what to make of Velleius Paterculus' so-called 'Roman History,' a title appended by the initial editor Beatus Rheanus, and long since dismissed. It is a history unlike any other. Some scholars have labeled the work a summary universal history, while admitting its peculiarity sets it apart from the literature of this genre (e.g. Starr 1981, Woodman 1975). An essay published as recently as 2011 arguing against this classification serves as sufficient evidence for the continued relevance of the question of genre to contemporary scholarship on Velleius (Rich 2011).

External comparanda have proven insufficient; more telling clues are to be found in Velleius' own words. From his writing, a profile of the author begins to emerge which, coupled with our understanding of the literary tradition, reveals the mind of the writer at work. In my paper, I trace the features of Velleius' *History* relevant to literary criticism and literary composition in an attempt to reconstruct the writing process of the historian himself. By understanding the intentions of the author for his work, we might better understand the nature of the history as standing beyond traditional bounds of genre.

Scholars have noted the remarkable insertion of digressions concerning ancient literature in which the historian offers controversial assessments concerning the major writers of various genres. The authors most admired by Velleius are extolled as being, on the one hand, un-imitating, and, on the other, inimitable. This rubric finds itself most explicitly articulated in the case of Homer (1.5): *in quo hoc maximum est, quod neque ante illum quem ipse imitaretur neque post illum qui eum imitari posset inventus est*. This assessment stands remarkably in contrast to the corpus of ancient literary criticism generally, since the historian places an unprecedented premium on literary innovation.

Literary innovation takes on new significance in light of Velleius' discussion of *aemulatio* (1.16-17). The author rejects an over-saturated genre in favor of newly invented literary forms: *ut primo ad consequendos quos priores ducimus accendimur, ita ubi aut praeteriri aut aequari eos posse desperavimus, studium cum spe senescit, et quod adsequi non potest sequi desinit et velut occupatam relinquens materiam quaerit novam, praeteritoque eo in quo eminere non possumus aliquid in quo niteamus conquirimus*. The passage rings remarkably personal, not the hypothetical theorizing of a literary critic offering sterile observations, but the

personal confession of a writer desperate to achieve the literary greatness of his predecessors, but frustrated at the challenges of his work and the limitations of his own talent.

This conclusion may be applied to the case of the author himself, as is clear, I argue, from the fact that Velleius, through his discussion of literary *floruit* (1.16-17), makes evident his perception of the over-saturation of lengthy histories in the style of Sallust and Livy. According to the historian, the greatest writers of any given genre write within a circumscribed period of time: *quis enim abunde mirari potest quod eminentissima cuiusque professionis ingenia in ean<dem> formam et in idem artati temporis congruere spatium et...cuiusque clari operis capacia ingenia in similitudine et temporum et profectuum semet ipsa ab aliis separaverunt?* This assessment is made in the case of history in particular at 1.17.2. When Velleius began writing, he approached the work with the understanding that histories in the style of Livy had already been mastered by his eminent predecessors.

The reader, in sum, can plausibly map the literary principles Velleius establishes onto the process of composition that the historian himself employs. It was Velleius' intention to produce a history unlike any other in a radical departure from the over-saturated tradition of lengthy histories, and it should be no surprise that scholars who have searched for a literary model have found none. Velleius' history stands over-and-above the historiographical literary tradition, a work *sui generis* designed to fit the strengths of its author's literary talents and suited to a new stage in Roman history.

Works Cited

- Rich, J. 2011 "Velleius' History: Genre and Purpose," in E. Cowan, ed., *Velleius Paterculus: Making History*, 73-92. Swansea.
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