

many ways, R. adheres to a version of modernism that is as distant to us as was Swinburne to Cummings.

I come away from this volume greatly impressed by Cummings whose novelty shines through all the more brightly, knowing it is grounded so firmly in classroom exercises and a deep and lifelong engagement with the past. I also come away from this study impressed with R.'s scholarship and the serious attention that she gives to an author she clearly loves. But the volume also reveals the difficulties that arise when single-author monographs interface with period studies, as scholars find the ground of their field shifting beneath them.

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LEO STRAUSS AND THE CLASSICS

BURNS (T.W.) (ed.) *Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought*. (Brill's Companions to Classical Reception 4.) Pp. xiv + 480. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015. Cased, €168, US\$218. ISBN: 978-90-04-24335-4.

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This book provides a much needed guide to virtually all of Leo Strauss's writings on Classical political thought. In six parts and twenty chapters, the book offers detailed commentaries on Strauss's work on Presocratic thought (Thucydides and Ancient Atomism in Lucretius); Classical political philosophy (three chapters centred on the discovery of 'natural right'); Aristophanes (one chapter); Xenophon and Plato (six chapters each); and Aristotle (one chapter). B.'s introduction places the contributions in the context of Strauss's broader *œuvre*, specifically of his mature turn away from modern (and postmodern) thought to the ancients. Written by a generation of Strauss scholars who can now draw on the entirety of his work, including recently transcribed seminars and lectures, the volume is not only a most useful companion to Strauss's most challenging writings, but perhaps the best general introduction to his mature thought. I focus here on three recurring themes that highlight Strauss's contributions.

The first theme is how to read Strauss reading the ancients. Strauss does not offer historical commentaries or contributions to Classical scholarship. He poses as a scholar but is rather a philosopher (p. 6), who seems to have dedicated his every waking hour to questioning in dialogue with great thinkers. His work deals with permanent questions as most radically addressed by the ancients, but it presupposes thorough knowledge of modern and postmodern alternatives. Genuine understanding of ancient thought requires self-reflection and recollection (p. 444), i.e. knowing that our hermeneutical horizon is suffused with concepts shaped by the same tradition we are trying to understand. Following Heidegger, it requires genuine interest in philosophy, and a kind of philology or passion to understand the phenomena that ancient words refer to. *Contra* Heidegger or Hegel, it requires abandoning our questions to recover those of the Socratics. Recovering part of (say) Plato's teaching is illegitimate; one must be familiar with the whole to understand the part – as Plato understood it (p. 157). Plato, moreover, does not communicate; he intimates, as does Xenophon: the Socratic education requires us to reconstruct the teachings (p. 163). However, there may be no simple teaching in Plato and his followers, but rather a highly suggestive perspectivism where Plato (and his

characters) – in dialogue with other Socratics – seek to illuminate parts of a complex cosmos of problems (e.g. p. 59).

There is, nevertheless, unity among the Classics – a second theme which suggests that a major contribution of Strauss is to have shown (against most scholars) that the minor companions and critics of Socrates – Xenophon and Aristophanes –, along with Thucydides, were not only thinkers of the highest rank but were engaged in the same conversation. Thucydides was an interlocutor of Plato (p. 55): a dialectical thinker, who presented the same problem from a different side and who arrived at the same view (as Plato's) concerning the limits of human nature and of politics (p. 68). Xenophon's Socrates is, in substance, identical to Plato's (p. 259): both respond to Aristophanes, who is a friendly critic; both hold the same view on the highest political standard (the rule of the philosopher-king); both practise an art of writing that is at times seriously playful (responding to Aristophanes) but more often 'Socratic rhetoric' aimed (among other things) at protecting philosophy from the tyranny of public opinion (p. 262). Finally, both learn from Socrates to separate the whole into 'tribes' or 'kinds', and thus to found 'political philosophy' on the insight that 'political things' (or phenomena that make a claim to our allegiance, such that we cannot possibly regard them neutrally, e.g. justice), are in a class by themselves. Political matters are the matrix of intelligibility through which reality is perceived. 'Political philosophy' is thus the first or ground-laying philosophy: all human thought presupposes aspirations concerning the right or the good, and it is in these aspirations – contained notably in our understanding of law – that any inquiry into being must begin (cf. pp. 200, 206, 212, 270).

A third theme is the permanence of problems that are, according to Strauss, coeval with human thought. A central theme of Strauss's investigations was the permanence of the question of God or the gods. The volume is a remarkably helpful guide to what this may mean. One line of argument is this. All humans are concerned with the problem of justice (cf. Plato's *Protagoras* 323b: it would be sheer madness for someone to assert about himself that he is not just). The question of justice is contained in the question of law – perhaps the gravest of all questions, according to Strauss – as well as in the question, 'What is a god?' – 'the all-important question' (L. Strauss, *The City and Man* [1964], p. 241). These questions are inescapable, but they are rarely raised, let alone made fundamental in the way that Strauss did. The question of law is fundamental in so far as law 'wishes to be the discovery of what is' (Plato, *Minos* 315a). The question of god is equally fundamental: not only are God or gods permanently invoked in our relation to the city, but what we take to be a god is also an index of what we understand by justice (since gods are beings who rule over human beings in accord with justice [p. 314]). But this is only preliminary: the decisive question has always been whether there are *causes* underlying all beings, such that philosophy or science are possible, or rather *gods* who create *ex nihilo*. According to B.'s reading of Strauss, this question was not only central to Plato and Xenophon, but it was also successfully 'settled' by them (p. 20).

The chapters are of a very high quality. It is particularly helpful to have a synoptic view of Strauss's *œuvre* on the Classics, which would otherwise require a long immersion in his difficult work. This Companion could dispel the view of M.F. Burnyeat (and others) that Strauss was a 'sphinx without a secret'. It could do this, ironically, by showing that there is indeed no secret – just exceedingly patient scholarship (on the part of Strauss) to pursue certain trains of thought wherever they may lead. This, of course, requires textual evidence and argumentation. The Companion packs a wealth of evidence in ancient sources. However, despite the uniform clarity of exposition in the volume, there are hardly any arguments, that is, attempts to establish claims in dialogue with

other Classical scholars. This is partly due to the fact that Strauss was navigating uncharted waters (e.g. with respect to Xenophon) and also to his predilection for dialogue with greater minds (e.g. those who did take Xenophon seriously [p. 195]). But it seems also to be due to a more troubling aspect, namely an apparent lack of interest in scholarship that could contradict the more politically conservative Straussian insights. Strauss himself was constantly engaged in dialogue with opponents, whose work he meticulously studied (Heidegger, Kojève, Gadamer, Schmitt, Lukacs). Inaccuracies in the work of his followers suggest that this practice is no longer followed (e.g. with respect to Heidegger, the reference to ‘Dekonstruktion’ [p. 214] and the summation of his work which gets him exactly wrong at p. 206: ‘Being’ is anything *but* a ‘thing’ for Heidegger). What is the evidence that Plato and Xenophon settled the question concerning the causes of beings (p. 20)? How can we know that ‘society is not possible if ancestral custom is not regarded as sacred as far as practice is concerned’ (Strauss, cited at p. 374)? Strauss relies throughout on indemonstrable insights, seemingly gained through intelligence or Aristotelian *nous*. That may be fine in philosophy, but it is at least problematic in political philosophy.

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BEN-HUR: LEW WALLACE’S NOVEL AND ITS EXTENSIVE AFTERLIFE

SOLOMON (J.) *Ben-Hur. The Original Blockbuster*. Pp. xviii + 910, colour ill. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Paper, £29.99, US\$44.95 (Cased, £105, US\$162). ISBN: 978-1-4744-0795-3 (978-1-4744-0794-6 hbk).

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This volume is an impeccably researched history of Lew Wallace’s novel, *Ben-Hur: a Tale of the Christ*, from its inception in the 1870s through the stage and screen adaptations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to early twenty-first-century versions across a range of media (though not including the 2016 film, which had not been released when the book went to press). S. convincingly argues throughout that *Ben-Hur* was a ‘phenomenon’, with the popular novel earning shrewd businessman Wallace unprecedented remuneration from book sales and theatrical royalties, and spawning a myriad of uses of the Ben-Hur name for products and services. In an era when *Game of Thrones* is often described as a ‘phenomenon’, with the success of George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels and the HBO television series supported globally by digital media, the large-scale success of *Ben-Hur* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when large advertising budgets and global networks did not exist, is all the more phenomenal. Although the history of *Ben-Hur* is primarily an American history, S. also includes the impact of the novel and adaptations in Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. He demonstrates the important legacy of a book that has received less critical attention than other contemporary novels that have had a less wide-ranging afterlife. The material that S. has amassed on all aspects of *Ben-Hur* is in itself phenomenal, clearly the product of years of painstaking research.