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Review of Authority: Construction and Corrosion

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Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994), 228 + xii pp., £17.95 (\$25.95), ISBN 0 226 48197 2.

This is in many ways an engaging book, written in a refreshingly direct and unobfuscatory style. Its chief problem is living up to the rather grand expectations raised by the title, expectations that the author half-way through the enterprise admits he did not mean to evoke (p. 74). What the reader will find is less a systematic essay or sustained treatment of authority than several penetrating readings of intense conflicts dealing with a substantially narrower issue: controlling who gets to speak in public settings that are authority conferring — in councils, senates and law courts. Lincoln treats three case studies at length: the Thersites episode of the *Iliad*, the political manoeuvring regarding Lucius Cotta's planned speech to the senate on the Ides of March 44 BC, and then a third, and to most people, lesser known account of Egil's suit to recover his wife's paternal inheritance at the Gulathing in Norway c.AD 934 as reported in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. Lincoln is at his best with Thersites and the 'sweet laughter' his discomfiture evokes. 'Sweet laughter' Lincoln shows, is the specific kind of derision directed against those who pretend to more than they are entitled to. In the Homeric world it is properly directed against the mere visibility of the ugly, lame and low. Lincoln wonders how the lowly Thersites even gained access to the circle so as to speak. He has no answer but one could imagine, given the unifying effect on the assembled multitude Odysseus's rebuke of Thersites had, that Thersites could have been 'set up', perhaps by Odysseus himself. Surely such a provocative strategy would not have been unthinkable. Indeed in the next episode — Caesar's attempt to orchestrate his election as king by massaging the forms of prophecy — Lincoln shows just how such manipulative strategies were part of the ready currency of grand Roman politics. His presentation of the events leading to Caesar's assassination is informative and suspenseful as well; the author has a genuine flair for compressing learning effortlessly into swift-moving narrative.

Lincoln is not quite as successful with the Old Norse material, for reasons it would take me too long to spell out, although even here the account moves briskly. But part of the reason is that he troops along too uncritically in the tracks of Bakhtin and James Scott in making opposition to authority — what Lincoln calls corrosive discourses — less complex, that is, less implicated in authority than it often is. In Lincoln's account corrosive discourses are more than 'non-authoritative', they are 'downright antithetical to the construction of authority' (p. 79). They 'eat away' at claims and pretensions of authority with gossip, cursing, graffiti, mockery, obscenity. I think he underestimates the extent to which such corrosive styles are knowingly elicited by authority and even have their complex role to play in upholding it. Mockery and ridicule do not always work to undermine; grumbling after all, like satire in R.W. Southern's words, 'is an unwilling tribute to power; but it also implies the recognition of a certain

inevitability in the thing satirized, a lack of any constructive alternative'. Not all authority is pompous; it too knows a multitude of styles, some of them ironical in the extreme and even making use of the broadest and most vulgar comedy: witness Odysseus's slapstick treatment of Thersites.

One of the nicer features of this book is the decision to go after issues traditionally dealt with as matters of abstract theory with imaginative readings of texts describing actual practices, showing just what kind of labour, planning, strategizing, etc. went into controlling or resisting the control of public spaces devoted to authoritative speech. The book is entertaining and filled with local insights that are worth the price of admission, even if certain pieties intrude a bit at the end.

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