Matthew Fox will be known to readers of this journal as the author of Roman Historical Myths, which, though subtitled The Regal Period in Augustan Literature, included an opening chapter on Cicero’s De republica. He returned to De republica, emphasizing its dialogic and ironic character, in a contribution to the volume Intratextuality. In the work under review he carries this approach further and extends it to other Ciceronian texts.

The title of the book is, Fox admits, “slightly provocative” (p. 1). Indeed, he immediately acknowledges that “there was no such thing as ‘philosophy of history’ in the ancient world, and Cicero did not write it”. It turns out that what Fox has in mind is to select as his “main material… those works where it seems to me that Cicero makes historical representation into a particularly central part of the method of the work in question” (p. 10). In the event he focuses on Rep., de Orat., Leg., Brut., Div., and Fam. 5.12. There is danger of petitio principii here, which is acknowledged (p. 10) but not avoided by Fox, since it is inherent in his project: he has selected his texts for their major focus on history and then claims on this basis that Cicero has some sort of ‘philosophy of history’.

Fox’s main argument, briefly stated, is that Cicero’s skepticism is central to his theoretical writing and that this fact has been obscured over centuries in which he served as a basic educational text and was accordingly treated as a dogmatist. Fox combines this with a critique of the current state of anglophone Ciceronian studies, which, on his view, have either been neglected or relegated to an insular specialist preserve, potentially helpful literature in French having been all but ignored. Fox therefore addresses his book to general classicists in hopes of sparking wider interest in his author. Though deconstructionist criticism has all but passed Cicero by, Fox thinks that, at least as an author of theoretical dialogues,
Cicero can be redeemed for current readers by showing him to be an ironic skeptic, rather than the self-promoting dogmatist often depicted. Whatever one may think in general of deconstructionism and its application to literature, Fox’s argument about Cicero’s skepticism deserves a hearing.

Some of Fox’s decisions as to inclusion or exclusion of texts, and the reasons given, are odd. Thus on p. 209 the inclusion of Div., rather than N.D. and Fat., is ascribed to its “personal quality”. That criterion would, however, also have argued for inclusion of Off., which receives no detailed discussion. Again on p. 258 Fox explains that “the main reason for including a discussion of the letter [to Lucceius] here is that in it Cicero displays a particularly cynical attitude toward historical fact”. But the letter seems out of place in this book, where Cicero’s theoretical writings are the focus. The letter is a different type of communication, not intended for the general public (albeit made available to his alter ego Atticus) and, like a miniature oration, arguing a certain case. The truth-status of its claims is thus on a different plane, comparable rather to his oratory than to his philosophy (cf. Clu. 139). The following chapter (“Cicero from Enlightenment to Idealism”, based on detailed analysis of John Toiland’s prospectus for a collected edition of Cicero’s works) also sits oddly here. It seems to undercut Fox’s earlier claim that Cicero’s place in school curricula abetted the dogmatic interpretation of his works; Toiland’s view that Cicero’s rôle in education worked against his content being taken seriously at all seems more plausible (if more cynical; see p. 296).

Fox’s approach is based upon Cicero’s adherence to the Skeptical Academy and use of the dialogue form. In epistemology Cicero was a thoroughgoing skeptic; indeed one might have expected Fox to begin with an analysis of the Academici libri/Lucullus in order to ground his position firmly in that important text; instead, this foundational work of Ciceronian skepticism is discussed rather briefly and late (p. 246 ff.) so as to have little impact on the general approach. The question is whether or to what degree skepticism informs Cicero’s position in other departments of philosophy. Was he, for instance, a skeptic in epistemology and theology but, practically speaking, a dogmatist in ethics and political philosophy, given that the skeptic is allowed to carry on life in the world on the basis of probabilitas?5 The question is not raised by Fox, who tends to take Cicero’s skepticism as Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment and neglect its probabilistic side.

Fox’s view of the dialogue form is much influenced by Plato’s aporetic dialogues (pp. 57-68), dialogues of search rather than of dogmatic presentation. Certainly that was one model available to Cicero, though he was also familiar with Plato’s

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