



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Epos: Word, Narrative and the "Iliad" by Michael Lynn-George

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mask's authenticity." Schliemann in his report published in the Greek press claims that the corpse found under the other gold mask from Grave V (not the mask itself) "very much resembles the image which my imagination formed long ago of wide-ruling Agememnon." Did the genuine masks lack what Schliemann in *Mycenae* calls "features . . . altogether Hellenic"? Was the "Agememnon Mask" created accordingly? But in that case one would have expected this mask to have been "found" later—perhaps considerably later—than the others. Traill's own examination of the evidence shows that this was not so.

The minute damage that would be caused by the scientific tests desired by Traill and Calder might be justified. But they must supply evidence, not suspicions, before their theories are accepted.

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Epos: Word, Narrative and the "Iliad." By MICHAEL LYNN-GEORGE. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988. Pp. xii + 302. \$35.00.

Lynn-George's book (originally a 1984 Cambridge dissertation) blends literary analysis with metacritical philippic. He exposes theoretical deficiencies in particular previous critical perspectives by offering his own readings of various passages, themes, etc. The analysis throughout is broadly deconstructive and often proceeds on a high level of abstraction. This is not a book for the novice; readers desiring critical description of the epic couched in a more conventional idiom of explication will do better to turn to recent books by, for example, Camps, Griffin, Redfield, or Schein.

In the first part of his book, "Between Two Worlds," Lynn-George explains at (excessive) length Erich Auerbach's now venerable characterization of Homeric epic narrative as a procession of phenomena in an absolute spatial and temporal foreground. He then elucidates passages (e.g., the *Teichoskopia*) and themes (e.g., the *boule* of Zeus) that defy Auerbach's simplification of the poem. Thus, the imperfective aspect of the verb in the phrase *Dios d' eteleieto boule* in *Il.* 1.5 contributes "the force of a vast indefiniteness. . . . It produces a plan and a process without end, a plan which has no defined goal and a process which has no specified *telos*. . . . At the same time it . . . emerges as having already begun in an indefinite past, a time without limit prior to 'the first time' of narrative, an eternity which opens across the borders of this entry into story, which is itself anything but a simple event" (p. 38).

In the second section, "The Epic Theatre: The Language of Achilles," both Milman and Adam Parry are the whipping boys. The author again reveals how a theoretical construct, in this case orality, falsifies the complex realities of the narrative. He targets, in particular, Milman Parry's reduction of formulaic language to metrical filler and concomitant diminishing of semantic content. The central problem is, in Lynn-George's view, our beguilement by the notion of Homer's simplicity and rapidity, an entrenched critical *fable convenue* since Matthew Arnold. By attributing these qualities to the circumstances of oral performance, Parry obstructed a more "active and productive consideration of the possibilities created by words" (p. 80). Lynn-George then shows what a critical method freed from such theoretical restrictions may achieve by an analysis of the embassy scene of *Il.* 9. For example, Odysseus' omission of elements of Agememnon's original offer to Achilles is shown to entail "a process of difference, fixity and movement, preservation and loss" (p. 92) to which Achilles is somehow sensitive and reactive in his own choice of words. As for Adam Parry's well-known account of the dynamics of "The Language of Achilles," Lynn-George sees in it only

an unwarrantable segregation of Homeric narrative from other great works of literature. “If they [the Parrys] had examined the broader context of literature . . . they would have found that no concerns are more common in literature than those by which they sought to isolate the peculiarity of Homeric epic” (p. 98). The struggle of a character against the conventions of his language is not unique to Homer, nor is it a mark of linguistic limitations imposed by an oral poetics.

In his third section, “Mortal Loss and Epic Compensation,” Lynn-George attacks the misconceptions of a more hoary critical dogma—Analysis. Focusing specifically on Denys Page’s discussion of plot inconcinnities centering on the amnesia of Achilles respecting the events of Book 9, he detects a richly elaborated theme of “loss and recompense.” A sophisticated management of conflicting temporal relations is again disclosed: “This alteration in time persists well beyond book ix in the structuring of the epic narrative. The rift between Achilles and the Achaians shapes the narrative that follows with its prolonged divergence between Achilles’ continuing expectation, after book ix, of an Achaian supplication, and the Achaian estimation that such an approach has already been made, rejected, and therefore abandoned . . .” (p. 167).

Part 4 of the book, “The Homeless Journey,” is less polemical in orientation, or at any rate less narrowly directed against any one critic or school of criticism. It offers further illustrations of the advantages of an approach to the text that takes more fully into account the complexities and the depths (even of paradox) that inform it. For instance, Lynn-George demonstrates that “Achilles is placed between the two fathers Peleus and Priam (xxiv.540–2). In relating two fathers, and in his reflection on his own relation to the two, Achilles links them in their grief caused by his simultaneous and opposed roles . . . ‘not caring for’ / ‘giving care to.’ At the same time Achilles resists any single identity in a speech which sets the two fathers apart in the differences of their shared destiny . . .” (pp. 246–47).

One cannot in a short space detail more than a few of the hundreds of individual interpretations Lynn-George makes. The reader may, of course, question the validity of discrete critical analyses and even of his overall argument for temporal and linguistic complexity in the epic. Those allergic to deconstruction will dislike his methods in general. And, too, the author impedes his arguments by hideous sentence-structure (with subordinate clauses nested many levels deep), gratuitous rhetorical capers (especially chiasmus), and aberrant word choice. Still, the theoretical orientation throughout is salubriously “anti-foundational,” marked by a profound skepticism regarding doctrinaire approaches to the Homeric poems. Hence the impatience with literary critical (and historical) distinctions ascribing to texts of one tradition an exclusively “surface” meaning and level of intent, but to others depth and intricacy. Preconceived notions of authorship—autonomous vs. traditional, single vs. multiple, oral vs. literate—are laid bare as debilitating critical ideologies deserving no place in the elucidation and adjudication of artistry in a given text. Lynn-George carefully avoids exclusive claims of insight for his own method: “The Homeric critic works with uncertainties, where the known is interwoven with . . . the unknown, perhaps forever beyond the reappropriation which makes of history the conquest of time and meaning” (p. 274).

Homerists tolerant of unconventional approaches to the *Iliad* will find much of value here, in terms both of textual explication and of metacritical judgment.

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