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HOMER'S WORDS

M. CLARKE: *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer. A Study of Words and Myths* (Oxford Classical Monographs). Pp. xvi + 378. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Cased, £48. ISBN: 0-19-815263-9.

Is there room for another study of the terms that are applied in Homeric poetry to life, death, and the passions, and another way of arguing that Homer's man is a stranger to the modern western reader of the epics? Certainly, if the study is as accurate and erudite as the present one, and if it disabuses scholars of the strange opinion that Homer lacked a unitary concept of the person. Clarke holds, on the contrary, that Homer had no need of a word for the living body because the body was not for him a mere property of the agent, to be distinguished from that centre of life and thought that we have learned to call the soul. Soul or *psyche* in Homer is the breath that deserts the man when he suffers death or insensibility, and at the same time the sum of his vital faculties both before and after death. Its survival is the survival of the man himself, its descent into the underworld a continuation of the rite of burial. But rituals, as the anthropologists tell us, are not conceived as causes by their celebrants: the burial and descent are a single fact (p. 181), and it can never be maintained that one is dependent on the other. Elpenor, for example, is already in the underworld when he begs Odysseus to give a decent funeral to his corpse (p. 189). As for the winged *psukhai* of Hector and Patroclus, these spring from the poet's mental aviary, not from an inherited belief in birdlike souls such as was prevalent in Egypt and is still adduced by lovers of the comparative methods which this volume sedulously avoids (pp. 6–7, 214, etc.). The case for each position is sustained with consummate scholarship, the evidence being honestly and lucidly presented, the objections fairly stated and well met. The following observations, for the most part theoretical in tenor, are offered only because without debate there would be no theory and therefore fewer books as good as this.

C. knows that few linguists now accept the claim that the structure and vocabulary of a language are the lattice through which speakers of that language see the world (p. 286). But if this thesis, with its corollary that we cannot frame the same philosophy in different grammars, has proved to be untenable with respect to the native American peoples studied by Whorf and Sapir—peoples whose development and ancestry we know to be entirely distinct from ours—how probable is it that Homer, the father of European literature, will have been a special case? Whorf and Sapir had at least living speakers and living cultures to interrogate; how is the modern reader to determine whether a word in Homer is literal or figurative, perspicuous or ironic, a dead trope or a new conceit of the poet, when the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves are the only relics of the milieu in which the poet and his audience conversed? Having bound himself to

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treat the diction of the epics as a closed system, C. declines to imitate the sallies of Onians into comparative philology, though he does assume now and then, with little confirmatory evidence, that cognate terms in Greek itself are likely to have associated meanings, at least in Homer (p. 141). Such arguments would be easier to justify if Homer were as primitive as Onians supposed, but C. knows that this premiss has been exploded by the decipherment of Linear B, and he properly maintains against the Analysts, who reason on the principle *quot homines, tot sententiae*, that the tongue which Homer inherited will already have been stamped with the complexity that supervenes on centuries of use.

Complexity is not, except in the argot of less able critics, a euphemism for inconsistency. Complexity in the strict sense, which arises in the reconciliation of otherwise disparate or incompatible tenets, will not explain the variety of idioms in Homer to describe the onset of sleep (pp. 235–9); and dissonance, not complexity, results when the same word meets us as an abstraction in one passage and as the proper name of a deity in another. C. is not content with the glib rejoinder that the poet is using metaphors, though while he eschews this term he will allow that Homer at times slips into myth, and even into the picturesque. To identify such anomalies, we need to ascertain what counts as normal in the poems, but even then the significance of such quantitative judgements will be measured by our general preconceptions about the functioning of language. Thus when West proposes that the absence of the noun *soma* in the sense of 'living body' merely proves that Homer had no occasion to use it (p. 286), C. retorts that there can have been no dearth of opportunities in two heroic epics of such magnitude. West might counter by pointing to a host of English writings from the battlefield in which the word 'body' never signifies anything but a corpse or a group of soldiers. Neither critic can disarm the other in such a controversy, nor is the outcome clearer when they vie in the parsing of a given passage. Lines 11.217–22 in the *Odyssey* are generally construed to imply a contrast between the soul that descends to Hades and the corpse that it abandons; C. contends that the logic of the sentence, and especially the connective particle *gar* at 219, stresses not the division of the man but his survival as the same being in an attenuated form. This reading, he adds, makes sense of the transition from the present tense to the perfect in the final verse; on the other hand, it seems to neglect the antithetical particles *men* and *de* (pp. 202–5). It is true that the use of these in the archaic poets is frequently at variance with our textbooks, but equally true that Homer's choice of tenses does not always follow the rules of Attic prose. There is some force in the maxim that 'the poet is the master of his language' (p. 285), and nowhere is this more evident than in the lines just cited, where the lore communicated to Odysseus by his mother's shade is new to him, and so (one might presume) to Homer's audience. The promulgation of novel truths, with words to match, was a recognized prerogative of all archaic poets, and consequently (to borrow a distinction from linguistics) it would be unwise to approach the songs of Homer as though they constituted a *langue* when they are rather an extraordinary specimen of *parole*.

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