ODYSSEAN THEMES

RILEY (K.) *Imagining Ithaca. Nostos and Nostalgia Since the Great War*. Pp. xvi + 331, b/w & colour ills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Cased, £30, US$40. ISBN: 978-0-19-885297-1.
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R.'s book comes at a time of resurgent interest in Homeric narrative – as evidenced by novels as varied in style and approach as Michael Hughes's *Country* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), David Malouf's *Ransom* (2009) or Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and *The Song of Achilles* (2011). As even this list suggests, the twenty-first century has gravitated towards *Iliads* rather than *Odysseys*, as much perhaps a reaction to the proliferation of twentieth-century Odyssean retellings (from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to the Coen brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou*) as a response to renewed geopolitical conflicts. In tackling works from the last 100 years, R. straddles the centuries and seeks to position *Imagining Ithaca*, and by extension the *Odyssey*, in the midst of such conflicts and anchor it firmly in the present moment; Brexit looms large in the introduction while Covid-19 makes an appearance in the afterword. Her wager is that the Odyssean, and specifically the Ithacan, theme has not been exhausted in scholarship or the arts; and the book, through the diverse and unexpected works it treats, largely succeeds in making this case.

The book is organised into six thematic sections, of three short chapters each. The larger arc is roughly chronological, moving from Rebecca West's novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) to Daniel Mendelsohn's memoir *An Odyssey: a Father, a Son, and an Epic* (2017); the latter neatly brings us back to the Homeric epic, which is discussed in the introduction but not that much within the chapters. Instead, R. refreshingly homes in on what the *Odyssey* only gestures at: Ithaca as experienced by Penelopean, Telemachean or Laertean figures. This accounts for the book's major strength, namely the breadth and variety of material that it tackles: from films and television documentaries to government reports and memoirs to, more conventionally, novels, poems and plays. Though almost all the works R. examines are in English, she ranges across the anglophone sphere; her chapters criss-cross from London to South Africa, from Australia to Spain, from Ireland to Zimbabwe or Zion. Indeed, I found most compelling the chapters that take us away from the British milieu; though there are sensitive readings throughout the book, the highlights for me were the chapters on Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982), William Wyler's film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and especially Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003). The thoroughness of R.'s research is evident in the fact that additional Odyssean narratives and exemplars crop up throughout the book, threads to be pulled by future scholars.

Because R. steers clear, until the last chapter, of texts that are deliberately patterned on the ancient epic, she is able to open our eyes to more unexpected texts that could productively enter into dialogue with each other and with the *Odyssey*. She should be commended for not taking a straightforward approach to the Homeric paradigm; indeed, analogies do not have to be one-to-one or references explicit in order for works to be read fruitfully in light of the *Odyssey*, whether or not their creators intended them to be. However, the book's strength in this respect also results in its main weakness. Once you exclude material clearly and directly based on the *Odyssey*, the Ithacan topic is so broad – nostalgia and longing, journeys and exile, childhood and loss, ideas of home and of

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the past – that almost any text could be seen as addressing it. The author has to make a case for why she includes *these* texts instead of others. This can be done on the basis of some pre-existing coherence (e.g. texts produced in a specific time and place), which is something R. wants to avoid, I think rightly, in the name of inclusivity and surprise. Or texts could be selected because, when put together, they tell a particular story or allow the author to make a particular kind of argument. The book's introduction and afterword suggest that R. has an interesting and potentially controversial argument she wants to make: that, even in the era of Brexit, nostalgia can be productive and future-oriented, that 'to give thoughtful utterance to nostalgia, and build a manifesto from it, could conceivably be a progressive and purposeful thing' (p. 20). Yet the fully independent chapters do not explicitly build up towards making this case. The readings of nostalgia do get more optimistic as the book goes on – though the antepenultimate, hagiographic chapter on Luis Portillo, overly and uncritically reliant on his son's framing narrative, is eyebrow-raising –, but that is not quite the same as sustained and coherent argumentation. I can easily imagine a chapter on another text being swapped in for almost any of the chapters without it making any difference to the book's overall shape.

Another flipside of the book's impressive range is that the differences between the materials examined are sometimes flattened by juxtaposition – and this too might have been rectified by building discursive bridges between chapters. In Part 4, which treats the paradoxical homesickness for homes never actually known, a heartbreaking chapter on Australia's aboriginal 'stolen children', who long for a childhood they were prevented from experiencing because of government intervention, is sandwiched between chapters on a Carson McCullers essay and Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011). (These chapters themselves sacrifice nuance for breadth, attempting to cram Ithaca-oriented accounts of, respectively, American literature *tout court* and 'Lost Generation' modernism in under fifteen pages each, all the while ostensibly discussing McCullers and Allen.) Conceptually I recognise the repeating pattern that prompts this juxtaposition – yes, the twenty-first-century protagonist of *Midnight* feels deprived of the experience of 1920s Paris –, but I found jarring the lack of acknowledgement of the different moral and ethical stakes involved in each case.

The *Odyssey* overlay often works in this way too; to take again as an example the stolen children chapter, the matter-of-fact alignment of the children with Telemachus seems to me almost absurd. Odysseus' son may feel dispossessed, but he also grows up in the family home, raised by a mother he bullies; and the reason for his dispossession is not a cruel and racist government programme but the fact that his father is off to war, killing and looting – and he will do some more of that, with Telemachus' help, when he returns. This instance is the most striking, but there are more cases where the insistence on the *Odyssey* does not truly illuminate the works under consideration, either because the complexities of the Homeric text are not taken into account (e.g. Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors and maids or the loss of his companions are at no point discussed) or because the echoes, in the absence of detailed analysis, appear incidental (a lunch with a substitute father-figure here, a twenty-year absence there) or strained (the regenerating tree in Doris Lessing's childhood home may recall Odysseus' legendary bed, but what of the fact that the inhabitants want to cut it down instead of preserving it?). If the *Odyssey* is so diluted as to be simply about a man struggling to come home or about his son struggling to deal with his absence and if Ithaca just signifies a vague and infinitely malleable sense of home or 'seeking what is absent' (p. 22), neither the text compared to it nor the epic are necessarily enriched by the comparison.

Still, *Imagining Ithaca* opens new prospects for thinking about and with the *Odyssey* more broadly. I am grateful to R. for pointing me to fascinating, lesser-known texts and

for her meticulous contextualisation of each one. By taking us on a truly odyssean tour of many cities and many minds, she has laid the groundwork for much future research on these materials.

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ANCIENT FABLES AND THEIR CONTEXT

LA PENNA (A.) *La favola antica. Esopo e la Sapienza deglia schiavi*. A cura di Giovanni Niccoli e Stefano Grazzini. Pp. 420. Pisa: Della Porta Editori, 2021. Paper, €25. ISBN: 978-88-96209-42-4.
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The present volume gathers the works published by L.P. on ancient fables and, more generally, on Aesopic traditions, including the *Aesop Romance*. Although some of them come from the 1990s, the majority were written in the 1960s, when L.P. undertook a systematic and comprehensive study of Graeco-Roman fables.

The turbulent history of this project, already conceived in 1952 (with a title very similar to that of the volume reviewed here) but never brought to completion, is skilfully reconstructed by the two editors, Niccoli and Grazzini in their extensive introduction to the collection. In their essay they place the investigation carried out by L.P. within the Italian cultural context of the time, highlighting his ethical and political compromises, especially evident in the article 'La morale della favola esopica come morale delle classi subalterne'. However, there is no attempt to frame L.P.'s original contribution within studies on the Aesopic tradition. More attention to this aspect would have led to a better appreciation of his contributions on the *Aesop Romance*; above all, it would have made clearer the importance of this publication for scholars interested in the ancient world.

The articles are not presented in chronological order, but according to the thematical sequence planned in the above-mentioned project. For this reason, the most recent article is placed at the beginning and not at the end. This text (Chapter 1), originally an introduction to a pocket edition of Aesop's fables, offers a brief summary of the planned book and thus provides a frame for the subsequent articles, which appear as individual pieces of an incomplete mosaic. This chapter is followed by a pair of chapters on the Near Eastern origin of the fable. The first (Chapter 2) is an informative synthesis, while the second (Chapter 3), consisting of three sections, brings together two articles published in 1964 and 1991. The second section, drawn from the article of 1964, seems to identify in a Babylonian dialogue the same opposition between a foolish master and a clever slave that defines a significant part of the *Aesop Romance*. This hypothesis needs further verification, but nevertheless invites caution against seeing this aspect as a Greek innovation.

The *Aesop Romance* is discussed in Chapter 4, which adds to an important article published in *Athenaeum*, a lesser-known review of A. Wiechers's volume *Aesop in Delphi* (1961). The prudence and philological acumen with which L.P. evaluates Wiechers's often too fanciful hypotheses has unfortunately not received its due acceptance in subsequent studies: the idea of Aesop as a φαρμακός is commonly accepted and has recently been further developed, for instance, by T. Compton (*Victim of the Muses*

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