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BOOK REVIEWS

GEORGE DIMOCK. The Unity of the Odyssey. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. Pp. xii + 343. Cloth, $30.00.

In 1956 George Dimock published in *The Hudson Review* what proved to be one of the most exciting and influential essays ever written on the *Odyssey,* "The Name of Odysseus." Beginning from close observation of a textual detail, the poet's association of the name of Odysseus with the Greek verb *odussasthai,* which means variously 'to suffer' and 'to inflict pain', Dimock went on to show that this association between Odysseus and the experience of pain, both active and passive, is central to the *Odyssey*'s meaning and moral vision. Not only did this essay offer a key to the poem's enduring message but it represented a new departure in Homeric criticism, a turn away from technical preoccupations to an appreciation of the poem as literature: Dimock's essay stands as a landmark in the effort to bring more literary approaches into postwar American classical studies.

In the intervening years, Dimock's ideas have shaped the vision of the *Odyssey* developed and communicated to their students by countless teachers, both of classics and of literature. Among the most inspired and inspiring of those teachers has, of course, been Dimock himself. In this book-length study he now makes available the results of an intense life-long encounter with the *Odyssey,* working out the implications of his own seminal insights through a detailed, closely-meditated reading of the entire poem.

Dimock's discussion follows the structure of the poem, explicating the text in twenty-four chapters corresponding to the *Odyssey*'s twenty-four books. There are no footnotes, and only a few parenthetic references to works contained in a page-long bibliography, but the book is engaged in a dialogue with the entire tradition of Homeric scholarship, particularly in a defense of the *Odyssey* against all separatist arguments, against any position that would fragment the poem or question the appropriateness of any of its parts. As his title signals, Dimock's view of the *Odyssey* is unwaveringly unitarian, and he begins by enlisting Aristotle in his cause. Adopting the argument of the Yugoslav scholar K. Gantar, he claims that in *Poetics* 1451a Aristotle does not assert, inaccurately, that the boar hunt on Parnassus is left out of the *Odyssey* because it would impair the poem's unity, but rather that it is included to assure that unity. That the boar hunt should become the *Odyssey*'s badge of unity is hardly incidental, since that is the episode in which Odysseus receives his significant name. For Dimock the formal unity of the poem is inextricable from a thematic unity centering on the fulfillment and revelation of Odysseus' possession of his name. The unity of the poem as an artifact further corresponds to the coherence

of the world the poem describes, of which the significance of Odysseus' name is one indication. This is a world in which there is a reliable correspondence between words and things. Not only Odysseus but virtually every other character in the poem is found to have a name that matches his or her essence. This reliability carries over as well to the way in which the words of the poem communicate with its modern interpreter. Dimock opens by stating his conviction that readers' enjoyment of the poem is itself a sign that they correctly guess "what Homer means to imply," and adds that "guesses at implications confirm themselves by suggesting further guesses elsewhere in the poem consistent with the original ones and pointing towards the poem's unity" (3). In an era which has seen the emergence—and outside classics even the ascendance—of interpretive approaches that can be classed under the label "hermeneutics of suspicion," this is a moving example of a hermeneutics of trust.

The *Odyssey* responds to Dimock's trusting analysis by revealing itself as a work in which no detail is unnecessary or out of place and by presenting a universe governed by order and justice, a benign world in which divinities do not represent strange or irrational forces, but rather embody "the remarkable" in human life (16). Every action of the plot contributes to an exposition—and, beyond that, a justification—of Odysseus' association with pain. By providing an answer to the question posed by Athena in Book 1, when she asks Zeus why, if Odysseus has avoided recklessness and has honored the gods with sacrifices, Zeus continues to *odussasthai* him (*Od.* 1.62), the poem constitutes itself as a theodicy and solves what Dimock calls "the problem of evil." The entire epic works towards a demonstration that both the pain Odysseus inflicts and the pain he suffers are purposeful and valuable. How this vision coalesces with Dimock's defense of the poem's technical perfection can be seen from his interpretation of the notorious second divine council in Book 5. Where Tilman Krischer has found the traces of an emerging narrative technique that can only present simultaneous events as subsequent to each other, Dimock sees a deliberate restatement of the question of whether Zeus rules an ordered universe in light of the apparent injustices—the Ithacans' forgetfulness of their good king and the suitors' murderous designs on Telemachus—that have been revealed in the intervening books: "The second council on Olympos reflects no naive inability or reluctance to portray simultaneous happenings, but rather intensifies our awareness of the problem of evil" (64). Many episodes bring instruction on this issue to the poem's characters as well as its audience. In his narrative to the Phaeacians, for example, Odysseus recommends himself to a people unfamiliar with pain by justifying his violent past. Thus the story of the Cyclops offers multiple reasons for the infliction of pain, showing it to be inherent in human existence from the moment of birth and associating it with just vengeance, human advancement, and the enforcement of respect for the gods. Above all, this and every episode show the infliction of pain to be essential to the assertion of identity and the winning of fame, or, in Dimock's recurrent formulation, to the hero's fulfillment of his name.

These emphases produce a reading that is beautifully attuned to the poem's own powerful interest in promoting, celebrating, and vindicating its central hero. But Dimock's determination to show that nothing done by the poet or by his hero is ever gratuitous, excessive, or misplaced inevitably involves some strained argumentation and a programmatic denial of the poem's polyvocality, its incorporation of conflicting voices, conflicting values, and conflicting traditions. Since Penelope has recently received considerable attention as a figure who brings to the poem challenges to its dominant, Odysseus-centered values, it is striking that she is relatively unimportant to Dimock's interpretation: Penelope is one of the few characters whose name is not found to be significant, and the chapter devoted to Book 23 is one of the shortest in the book. Dimock underplays the *Odyssey*'s complex origins in his insistence that there are no inappropriately used formulas and no narrative loose ends and indeed that even the Alexandrian book divisions are part of the flawless whole. As he moves from the earlier parts of the poem, in which Odysseus is mainly a sufferer, to the later parts in which he is seen actively inflicting pain, Dimock has to struggle to show that Odysseus' ruthless self-assertion is always just. The humane sensibility that makes Dimock such a sympathetic interpreter of poetry causes him trouble when he wants to explain what is so admirable about killing a boar or what the point is of Odysseus' unnecessary protraction of the suffering of Laertes and Penelope. At times, he takes refuge in cultural difference, reversing his normal belief in the poem's unhampered communication with its readers: he asserts, for example, that we would better understand the boar hunt and the slaughter of the suitors "if we assisted personally at the death of every living creature we eat, as people in other ages generally did" (305). Finally, his explanations of why characters are made to suffer veer towards the tautological. For example, Odysseus effectively makes Laertes suffer more because he is suffering already: " . . . instead of avoiding or seeking to obviate his father's pain from a mistaken tenderness, he indulges it to the full . . . giving his father a chance to play out his role and be himself" (329).

The *Odyssey*'s ultimate answer to Athena's question turns out to be that the sufferings Zeus imposes not only cause Odysseus' name to be realized in its full significance but also ensure its enduring fame. If—to his credit—Dimock sometimes falters in his attempt to delineate a world in which pain is always justified, he is splendidly successful at showing how, in the world of the *Odyssey*, the inescapable presence of pain is redeemed through an association with value. Dimock does his readers a great service through his devoted, detailed uncovering of the *Odyssey*'s appreciation of suffering: as the necessary price of honor, as that which gives meaning to all forms of reward, and as the precondition of the most intense experiences of joy.

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