

# Book Review

*Palimpsestes épiques: Récritures et interférences génériques.* Dir. Dominique Boutet and Camille Esmein-Sarrazin. PU Paris-Sorbonne, 2006. Pp. 379.

Based on a colloquium held in Paris in 2004, *Palimpsestes épiques* is a wide ranging and ambitious collection of essays that seeks to demonstrate the ongoing vitality and self-renewing nature of epic in the Western tradition. As co-editor Dominique Boutet explains, epic is the product of the gathering of shared cultural materials which are then passed on within and across communities over time, and serves as a mirror for each era in which it reemerges. By its very nature, then, epic invites a theoretical approach which recognizes its capacity for self-renewal over time. In this, the book is largely successful. Many of the contributions are valuable both as stand-alone articles and as pieces of the larger project. The diverse textual relationships that the contributors explore are articulated through a colorful array of interrelated terms: reuse, recycling, reinvention, reactivation, emulation, manipulation, rewriting, and reinterpretation. The reader is treated to carefully explicated instances of diverse modes of borrowing of epic passages, sequences, scenes, and style, ranging from the poetry of Hellenistic Greece to prose works of the late twentieth century, as well as no less than three articles devoted to the intersection of epic and opera. This significant attention to opera will prove more or less welcome depending on the reader.

An essential feature of *Palimpsestes épiques* is its consideration of the enduring nature of epic over a period of millennia, both apart from and within the works that it influences. This approach constitutes an explicit refusal of the notion that epic is no longer possible in the modern age, a stance adopted, for instance, by Adorno in his essay “On Epic

Naïveté.”<sup>1</sup> The exploration of the continuing vitality of epic is predicated, then, on the notion that epic regenerates itself through the very act of its own rewriting. From its title page onward, the volume recalls its debt to Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*,<sup>2</sup> which explores interrelationships between what he calls *hypo-* and *hypertexts*. The *hypotext* is a source text such as Homer’s *Odyssey* which yields, through what Genette describes as transformative processes, *hypertexts*, or subsequent, derived works such as Vergil’s *Aeneid* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. While Genette’s influential book certainly enjoys homage in the title and his theories subtend many of the essays in varying degrees, on the whole, it serves more as a point of departure than as a critical template imposed upon the book.

In establishing the parameters of their study as they did, with epic influence taken as both substantive and stylistic, and considered over thousands of years, the volume’s editors could have anticipated an almost infinite variety of contributions; and, indeed the combination of topics is at times dizzying (Theocritus, Juvenius, Kundera, Wagner, and Delteil, to name just a few), but, for the most part, the book is harmoniously organized. Given this broad scope, Boutet’s lucid introductory essay is particularly valuable for the appreciation of the book as a whole. The conclusion is equally useful, for it provides welcome syntheses of many of the articles, thereby offering a welcome bit of retrospective guidance after nearly three hundred fifty pages of sometimes rugged road.

The volume sets out from the notion that there exist two distinct major sources for the epic from which to build, the ancient and the medieval. From there it proceeds in four distinct thematic sections: I. La Matrice homérique, II. Réécriture d’épopées, III. Le recyclage d’un style, IV. L’épique et le renouvellement des poétiques. The book is not without flaws. Within each section, certain articles are noticeably stronger than

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<sup>1</sup> *Notes to Literature*, trans. Sherry Weber Nichol森, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

others, both with regard to the goals of the volume as a whole and also in their success in balancing appeal to scholars in their own fields with accessibility to nonspecialists. Certain chapters are clearly drawn from elsewhere, sometimes from larger works either in progress or already published. In some of these cases, the materials that are borrowed or excavated for this volume are not as smoothly integrated as one would hope. What is more, the attempt to address a wide variety of literatures over such a vast timeline means that the reader must travel, sometimes quite jarringly, between familiar and unfamiliar territory within a given section.

The essays in the first section, “La Matrice homérique,” range from the Hellenistic period all the way to such recent works as Olivier Rolin’s 2002 *Tigre en papier*. The first piece, Alain Billault’s “Théocrite et Polyphème. Remarques sur les *Idylles* XI et VI,” is among the best in the collection; it is highly readable, while providing an excellent theoretical grounding for the rest of the section. Billault studies the pastoral lyric of the late-third-century B.C.E poet Theocritus, who used his *Idylls* to stage encounters between rival poets in scenes which contain the *mise en scène* of the choices facing poets composing under the imposing shadow of Homer. The response to Homer’s looming memory, he shows, was one of both dependence and resistance. The poet’s alterations of Homeric episodes and characters were carried out such that while they remained recognizable, the reinterpretations themselves embodied rich commentary on the very problem of poetry after Homer. The most striking example is the character of Polyphemus, who is hardly a love-sick poet in Homer, but becomes, with Theocritus, a seducer, an esthete, and even a producer of fine sheep’s milk.

In this same section, “L’épique mitigé. De l’art d’accommoder les fureurs d’Achille sous le règne de Louis XIV,” by Jean-Philippe Grosperin, offers another particularly compelling study, in this case of avatars of Achilles in seventeenth-century France. In the age of *bienséances* and deep concern for the unity and order prescribed by Aristotle, certain essential traits of Homer’s heroes, however superior,

needed to be reconfigured. In the hands of a series of authors of the *grand siècle*, Achilles appears less filled with wrath, although still proudly rebellious. He is refashioned to be softer, more measured, so as to conform to contemporary mores. Billault deftly presents the subversion of epic models and then poses a provocative, even essential question concerning the ultimate effect on epic when essential Homeric traits, such as the wrath of Achilles, are taken away.

Finally in this first section, Sylvain Detoc's "Résurgences odysseennes, recyclage de l'épique" explores the notion of *recyclage* in the circular voyage, or *nostos*, the essential literary model of departure and "grand retour" which has yielded far more than simple retellings of Homer's tales. Through the lenses of modern authors such as Kundera, Mendelstam, and Kazantzakis, the author suggests that just as Odysseus is always returning, so new stories of departure and return continue to renew the genre. The concept of *nostos* provides both the narrative structure and the capacity for regeneration, which is the very condition for the continual rebirth of the epic voyage story.

The second part of the book, "Réécriture d'épopées," focuses on epic of the Middle Ages, beginning with a study of allusions to Vergil in the Carolingian period. Epic here is in its historiographical mode, at the crossroads of a variety of written genres, and represents a significant departure from the mythological matter of Homer. Those who might expect to find consideration of the *Song of Roland* or of some of the more widely known epic material of the medieval period may be disappointed. The texts under consideration here tend to be lesser-known or at least less-studied titles such as *Gerbert de Mez*, *Auberi de Bourgoïn*, and *Berte aus grans piés*. While this is not necessarily a criticism, it does point to a sometimes unfortunate tendency in the book towards narrow focus within the individual pieces, sometimes to the detriment of the overall effect.

The first piece here, Francine Mora's "Comment jouer avec les *auctores*. Sur quelques réécritures carolingiennes de Virgile (Ermold, Abbon, le *Waltherius*)," is a comparatively strong one, and like Billault, she offers a clear and useful theoretical introduction to the section and for

the volume as a whole. Vergil in the Carolingian age is an admittedly vast subject, and Mora limits herself to focused discussions of instances of allusion in political poetic works by Ermold le Noir, the Waltherius poet, and the monk Abbo of Saint-Germain des Prés. Citing a provocative line from the poet Proba, “Maro mutare in melius,” Mora describes the urge to make changes that still reflected Vergil but somehow outdid him. She then shows how clerical plays of allusion became instances of Vergil redeployed to distinct ideological ends, in the interest, for example, of demonstrating the superiority of Christianity. Mora effectively presents multiple examples of this sort of manipulation of Vergilian scenes and shows how poets sought to compete with the Roman poet in ways that reflected the underlying rhetorical objectives of the poems in which they appeared. While not necessarily of the widest appeal, given the early medieval *hypertexts* in question, this piece is crucial for its establishment of the fundamental importance of Vergil across a variety of discourses from early on. This is all the more important given the disappointing fact that Mora’s essay represents the only concentrated attention paid to Vergilian influence in the volume.

The subsequent chapters in the second section enter what can be seen as a second or even third age of epic, covering the celebrated period of the French Middle Ages. Despina Ion’s “*Gerbert de Mez ou la revanche d’une écriture*” compares this sequel to its more famous predecessor *Garin le Loheren*. Of all of the contributors in the volume, Ion is the most explicit in her use of the unique idiolect of Genette, using his theories of diegesis to present her juxtaposed readings of two chansons de geste. The next piece looks at evidence of influence from *Auberi de Bourgoin* in Girart d’Amien’s neglected verse compendium *Charlemagne*. The chapters in the section are generally valuable on their own, but by the end of it, even the French medievalist may be pining for the reassuring presences of Homer and Vergil.

François Suard’s “*Les aventures de Berthe au(x) grand(s) pied(s) au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*” studies a series of dramatic works of the eighteenth century which were adaptations, sometimes not so felicitous, of a

thirteenth-century version of the *Berthe* poem, likely from a preserved version by Adenet. The essay is of the excellent quality and rigor that one expects of any work from this scholar. The article stands out in particular, however, for the stance that Suard adopts with regard to the relationship between the later dramatic works and their putative medieval source. In a tone not found elsewhere in the volume, he speaks of the adapters in terms of “infidélité” and distinguishes between “amateurs” interested in what they were adapting as opposed to traitors who unscrupulously betray their source texts. “Ils les trahissent donc sans scrupule,” he insists, “incapables qu’ils sont du reste de les interpréter correctement par rapport à un contexte à la fois littéraire et historique” (p. 144). Suard’s position offers a surprising contrast to the previous readings, either favorable or neutral, of instances of *recyclage* and reinterpretation, none of which considers issues of fidelity to sources or of respect for the primacy of the *hypotext*.

The third section of the book, “Le recyclage d’un style,” moves from the question of material and its reuse to more subtle questions surrounding the influence of epic style on other genres. This opening to the second half of the volume confronts the question of stylistic borrowing first with regard to epic influence in early Christian literature and hagiography and then moves on to consideration of Philippe Mousket and thirteenth-century prose historiography. Once again, the first piece in the section, “Épisme(s) et épopée dans la littérature chrétienne des premiers siècles” by Pascale Hummel, stands out for its overall quality. Her analysis of epic style in early Christian literature is an example of the volume at its best, at once attentive to the overall objectives of the project, hospitable to a broad audience, and, at the same time, of obvious scholarly value itself.

The fourth and final section, “L’épique et le renouvellement des poétiques,” looks at the ways in which different literary genres came to be sites for the reinvention of epic and also considers the reasons for these transformations. It contains two initial essays that explore literature of seventeenth-century France, followed by a lengthy in-depth look at the

modern epic poet Joseph Delteil. The rest of the section is made up of the three articles devoted to epic resurgences in opera from the early modern period up to Wagner. Sabine Gruffat's contribution "Le dialogue de la poésie héroïque et de l'idylle dans l'*Adonis* de la Fontaine: un héroïsme tempéré," richly engages the matter of epic style in a particular historical context, offering a welcome companion piece to the Groperrin's earlier study of Achilles. Her *Adonis* "tempéré" recalls his Achilles "mitigé," and both show French literary culture grappling with the nature of its revered yet sometimes troubling ancient heroes.

It would be unfair to criticize *Palimpsestes épiques* for any incompleteness, in particular given that it stems from a colloquium. From the start, its editors make no pretense of full coverage. They are clear in their desire to offer a panoramic view of the evolution of epic and to offer an initial attempt at revealing the riches of epic rewriting and renewal over time. In spite of this reasonable apologetic stance, the conclusion opens with the provocative suggestion that the volume has been working against the commonly held assumption that all attempts at epic after the Middle Ages were either failures or quickly forgotten. This assertion may have fans of such unforgotten postmedieval epic poets as Spenser, Milton, Ariosto, and Tasso scratching their heads (Ariosto does appear briefly in an article on seventeenth-century opera). That said, for anyone with broad interests in the history of literature in the west, this collection will have multiple articles of interest. For a medievalist audience, it offers ample satisfying material to be worth reading cover to cover, for it contains excellent contributions on Classical, Early Christian, and medieval topics and generally accessible studies in the more tangentially-related domains. *Palimpsestes épiques* represents a significant contribution to the body of secondary literature on epic and one of undeniable value to scholars in a variety of disciplines.

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