Seth L. Schein, *Homeric Epic and its Reception: Interpretive Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, xiv + 225 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-958941-8.

The book under review comprises twelve, mostly slender essays on Homer, Homeric epic, and Homeric reception, all of them previously published and spanning forty-five years, a career's worth of thinking and writing about an endlessly rich set of materials. The essays are remarkable for the consistency of the author's views despite the variousness of themes and topics. The first four chapters are literary readings that take their bearings from a focused scene or problem, two within the *Iliad* and two within the *Odyssey*, and then stand back to make a larger point about the poem in question. (One is put in mind of Erich Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt* method.) The next two essays are comparative in nature, dealing with what is Homeric about the *Hymn to Aphrodite* and with the *Iliad* as the *Odyssey*'s intertext. A chapter on meter follows, then two essays on the history of Homeric scholarship (Parry and Neoanalysis *à la* Kakridis, two of Schein's theoretical mainstays throughout). The book closes with three essays in literary reception, covering Cavafay, the problem of war as treated by Simone Weil, Rachel Bespaloff, Alice Oswald, and Christopher Logue, and the institutional history of Homer in the American curriculum from the nineteenth century to the present. All in all, a feast of topics, mostly dealt with in a wistful tone that finds in Homer a recognition of "the tragic nature of the human condition" (p. 9).

As one might have guessed from this last phrase, Schein's readings, at least in their tone and moral heft, are a product of a certain era of scholarship in the humanities in North America, one of whose leading exponents was Charles Segal during the sixties and seventies. And because of Schein's consistent attention to this particular problematic—tragic humanism, heroism that comes at a cost or price, brilliance backlit by a penumbra of loss, "terrible beauty," a confidence in the idea that each of the poems has recognizably "central ideas and values" to express, one set for each, and that poetic complexity *eo ipso* equates with ethical complexity—the essays are not only consistent thematically and in tone and register, but they also feel strangely unmoored from time. The last two essays are the exception. Here, contemporary reference points and the shift in focus to a more recent and recognizable reception-oriented study of ancient poetry suddenly signal that the twenty-first century has arrived. Their inclusion also creates a small dissonance: the readings of Homer here strain in different directions, and are probably incompatible with the tragic humanism of twentieth-century

scholarship. In this sense, Schein's book offers a lesson in miniature of the field's own developments.

The readings themselves are sensitive and rewarding, neatly organized, and are at their best when they bring out interesting textures in the Homeric corpus primarily through techniques of close reading. As a rule, Schein promotes a view that seeks out and finds poetic coherence and organic integration of verses, scenes, and episodes within the work that contains them—hence, a powerfully unitarian approach to Homer—in addition to locating coherence with surrounding mythology and surrounding oral poetic traditions, both postulated as preexisting Homer (a trademark of Neoanalysis; see p. 38). One of the more striking insights Schein offers focuses on the vulnerabilities of the gods in epic poetry as they "become implicated in mortal existence" (73). The point has been recently and forcefully made by Alex Purves (gods "fall" into time and bear its marks on their divine bodies: "Falling into Time in Homer's *Iliad*," *Classical Antiquity* vol. 25, no. 1 (2006): 179-209; cited by Schein), but it is also known in antiquity, for example in Longinus' eloquent comment from *On the Sublime* 9.7: "In giving the gods wounds, conflicts, punishments, tears, bondages, and all manner of suffering, Homer has, I would say, made the men of the Trojan war gods to the utmost degree possible, and the gods men. To be sure, death is always there as a harbor waiting for us whenever we are afflicted; yet it is not the gods' nature but their misfortune that Homer has made immortal." This is a promising line of interpretation, and it deserves to be pursued much further. Indeed, a book-length study on the vulnerability of the divine to mortal vicissitudes in classical antiquity and its implications is urgently needed.

Schein's readings also rest on a strong distinction between Homer's two epics, one that borders on a simplification. The *Iliad* is "one-dimensional," restricted in its scope, driven single-mindedly by considerations of *kleos* (glory) and "mortal heroism," while the *Odyssey* offers "a wide-ranging representation of reality, a capacious and manifold vision of life" (53-4). The *Iliad* is intently focused on its immediate objects, the *Odyssey* is inclusive and all-embracing. These are all contestable generalities. With them come a certain reduction of the *Odyssey* as well. Does the *Odyssey* "maintain a series of twofold versions of its hero" (47) or is he not rather manifold, polytropic, radically indeterminate, and forever changing in response to changing circumstances? Is it really the case that "the old-fashioned, raw heroic violence associated with the figures of an earlier age" exists only in the *background* of the *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, which is drenched in such violence (48)? In a word, is the *Iliad* a poem of death while the *Odyssey* is a poem of life? Modern readers from Horkheimer and Adorno (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944) to Mark Buchan (*The Limits of Heroism: Homer and the Ethics of Reading*, Ann Arbor, 2005) would vigorously contest this view. By the same token, it's doubtful that the *Iliad* is any "clearer and

more straightforward" than the *Odyssey* (47): it shows all the complexity, ethical and other, that the *Odyssey* displays, a point that Schein himself allows, a bit self-contradictorily, elsewhere in the book, most notably in chapter 11, where the essays reflect more recent approaches to Homeric epic and its reception. At times Schein generates some of the complexity that he finds in Homer by comparing, or rather contrasting, pre-Homeric poetic traditions, and in this way he as it were turns Neoanalysis into a motor for producing ethical readings. But much the same result can be generated out of the poems themselves, which raises interesting questions about what sort of presuppositions go into our ideas of poetic richness. What constitutes "complexity" in any given reading? Is it self-awareness, ambiguity, uncertainty, a sense of contradictoriness, or something else altogether? Does poetic complexity translate into ethical complexity *tout court?* All these elements are in play in this collection of essays, but no clear criterion is on offer. Much hangs in the balance if we cannot assign these features to the *Iliad* but only to the *Odyssey*.

Complexity is, however, not just a measure of texts. It is also a reflex of readers. To what extent can a reading "complexify" a simple or already "complex" text? Milman Parry's struggle with the competing impulses of historicism and humanism in his essay "The Historical Method in Literary Criticism" (1936), discussed in chapter 8, indicates a different kind of complexity—the sort that results from a historical conjuncture of readers, texts, and circumstances. Parry is keenly aware of his own historical and cultural situatedness, as someone "who lived in a certain nation, or city, or in a certain social class, and in very certain years" (Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. A. Parry, Oxford 1971, 409-10). His not so veiled reference to Nazi "propaganda" used "for political purposes" and in the process altering the modality of interpretations of the Greek past (412), is a further sign of his awareness of these impinging factors, and perhaps of their unconscious determination in the minds of readers. Auerbach had a similar insight regarding his own wartime publication (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* Princeton, 2003, "Appendix," 574): "*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s." Probably all good criticism should follow their example. Readings of Homer are symptomatic of cultural shifts and not just illuminative of Homer, which is one reason why Homer continues to be so responsive a topic to write on and so good a tradition to think with.

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