BOOK REVIEW

Defining Greek Narrative. Edited by DOUGLAS CAIRNS and RUTH SCODEL. Edinburgh Leventis Studies, 7. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 380. Hardcover, \$160. ISBN 978-0-748-68010-8.

hat would it mean to define ancient Greek narrative (henceforth AGN)? The category is delimited by a formal parameter ('narrative') that is hard to specify; a chronological parameter ('ancient') that lacks sharp boundaries; and a parameter ('Greek') that might be linguistic or geographical or socio-cultural, or some combination of the three. Should we look for narrative features that occur in all texts that satisfy the nonformal constraints? For narrative features that occur only in those texts? Or, more plausibly, for features that are characteristic in the looser sense of recurring more persistently in AGN than in other narrative traditions? That gives the project of definition a comparative dimension, which classicists are prone to confound with questions of transmission and cultural influence. But speculating about origins and influences is not the same as locating AGN in the possibility space of narrative.

According to Ruth Scodel's introduction, a spatio-temporal definition of AGN is prerequisite for "a meaningful narrative of how the practices of telling stories developed within Greek literature" (1); the pay-off of such a narrative would be the possibility of defining "what is particularly Greek and what is generally ancient or even universal" (2). "If the qualities of Greek narrative are universal," she argues, "and Greek narratives could all be analyzed in exactly the same way as those of the nineteenth century, Greek narrative would fail as a useful definer, and although narratological studies of individual texts or genres would not lose all value, they would be interesting only as they served interpretative goals" (2–3). Forget the nineteenth century: ancient Greek narratives are too diverse all to be analyzed in exactly the same way. So a definition of AGN would operate at a level of abstraction too broad to have interpretative purchase. In what way, then, would AGN be a *useful* definer? What is the project of defining AGN meant to achieve?

Part I, "Defining the Greek Tradition," comprises four papers on Homer. Reacting to Auerbach, Scodel finds Homer "a little more like the characteristic narrative of the Hebrew Bible than it seems superficially, but... still different" (76). Her excellent analysis focuses on three characteristics of Homeric narrative: "shift of interest-focus, emphasis on mind-reading, and self-limitation by the omniscient narrator, along with the constant self-revelation through speech of Homeric characters" (56). The interaction between these characteristics may make Homeric narrative "foundational for the western narrative tradition" (56): but how does it define AGN? Also in reaction to Auerbach, Johannes Haubold substitutes *Gilgamesh* as a text to read alongside Homer. He rightly concludes that Homer, though a "master of immediacy," also has "hidden depths" (27), and that "both Homer and *Gilgamesh* use their poetic resources to reflect on the human condition; and both insist that what makes us human cannot be read off the surface of things" (28).

Adrian Kelly, on Homeric battle narrative, also uses Ancient Near Eastern comparators in order to "grab at something of the Greek text's unique quality" (31). Kelly's critique of "genealogical" comparativism is well-founded, and readers of Homer should heed his advice: "let us not be too quick to see flaws... when there only interpretative opportunities and challenges" (40). But the uniqueness of a Greek text relative to Near Eastern comparators barely touches on the uniqueness of AGN relative to the narrative universe. The elaborate ring structures which Erwin Cook identifies in the *Odyssey* failed to convince me. In claiming that "this sort of highly symmetrical and balanced narrative architecture is ... a defining feature of Homeric epic ... " (76) Cook targets the wrong definiendum; there is an obvious non sequitur in describing this feature as "distinctively Greek" because it "influenced subsequent authors such as Aeschylus and Herodotus". None of the papers in Part I makes it clear how they help to define either the Greek tradition or AGN. If Homer's status is like that of the type specimen which defines a biological taxon, many ancient Greek narratives will be excluded from the Greek tradition because they fail to match the type specimen's narrative characteristics.

Parts II ("The Development of the Greek Tradition") and III ("Beyond Greece") are more diverse. Space constrains me to mention only two outstanding contributions. Douglas Cairns ranges widely across Greek literature in pursuit of the "principle of alternation" ("the idea... that the best one can expect is a mixture of good and bad fortune", 103); his extended discussion of Plutarch's *Lives* of Aemilius Paullus and Timoleon is particularly illuminating. But, as he

acknowledges, the principle is not "uniquely Greek" (136); nor is it a universal of AGN: it is "a salient and typical feature of Greek literary tradition, found in *some* of its most authoritative and influential manifestations" (136: my emphasis). Not a defining feature, then? Lisa Hau's exploration of "what makes Greek historiography Greek" (241) identifies five shared characteristics: stock situations, causality, didacticism, even-handedness, and alternating narrative strategies. But shared characteristics are not necessarily distinctive, and Hau acknowledges her sample's limitations: "the narrow focus is justified not only by the status of preservation of the works under scrutiny, but also by the fact that these works are the ones that inspired the succeeding western tradition of historiography" (242): that influence (which is not, of course, independent of preservation) is irrelevant to the *Greekness* of ancient Greek historical narratives.

This volume contains some excellent, and many good, contributions. As a collection of papers on Greek narrative, it would deserve almost unqualified praise. But its more specific theme creates a different set of expectations, which the contributors barely attempt to satisfy. Yet they show themselves able to engage interestingly with a variety of other questions. The theme itself is the problem.

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