

Nimis, Stephen A. *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition: The Simile*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 211 pages, \$17.95.

Stephen Nimis's study of simile in Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, Vergil, Dante, and Milton is a comparative linguistico-textual analysis with underpinnings in semiotic theory. An introductory chapter explains the methodology and ideological assumptions he adopts in particular from the work of Umberto Eco (theory of codes) and Michael Riffaterre (intertextuality). Exploiting these theoretical presuppositions, Nimis stakes a large claim for similes as narrative stratagems. He seeks to display and clarify how they perform integral rather than ornamental functions in the generation of narrative, as well as "how they function in the 'linguistic economies' which articulate and are articulated by these texts in their various historical contexts" (p. 22). This is a formidable agenda.

The book's longest chapter describes Homeric practice. The simile at 1]. 16.155-65, comparing the Myrmidons to wolves, is taken as a paradigm of typical narrative "ungrammaticality." Nimis argues that this particular "textual swathe" arises from a tension between, on the one hand, an expected narrative theme reflecting cultural values—the communal meal—and, on the other, the anti-social character of the action or of the persons whose actions are described in context. Specifically, this and other similes in Homer constitute diversions from one mode of narrative progression to an alternative mode. But once modal shift has occurred, the simile may itself actually propel the narrative in particular directions, taking on the character of primary force in text production. As regards cultural context, Nimis astutely relates this "propulsive poetics" to the circumstances of continuous oral composition/performance.

The chapters on the practice of other epic poets stress change in poetic practice resulting from altered historical conditions. The Aristotelian emphasis on structure and plot together with the increased interest in intra-psychic states combine to make simile serve new purposes in Apollonius. In Vergil, the political valences of the Roman evolution from republican to imperial government are reflected in the *Aeneid* and in the nature of its similes, which highlight the contrast between disorder and organization. In Dante, still other cultural and intellectual preoccupations are shown to shape the narrative dynamics of the *Divine Comedy*. The simile again has a propulsive quality, "helps to get the story told" in a manner responsive to special conditions of creation. Milton is a different case. *Paradise Lost* both subsumes the various demonstrated patterns of simile usage and stands apart from them by the artificiality of its adaptations. In this sense, Milton is linguistically more self-conscious and metacritical in outlook. He "exploits the play of differences which animates the aesthetic language of his predecessors so completely that

the productive possibilities of language are completely circumscribed. Milton's poem totalizes language not as a figure of the real, but as figurality itself" (p. 175).

Nimis succeeds admirably in disclosing the special importance of similes in epic from the perspective of a particular critical theory. I have only hinted at the detail, subtlety, and cogency of his discrete analyses. Given the limitations of a relatively short work devoted to five major poets, he manages both to shed light on discrete narrative swathes and to accumulate compelling arguments for his central thesis. His book will instruct anyone interested in the role of simile in the dynamics in epic narrative, whether or not the linkage of his specific explications with semiotic theory is found persuasive or useful.

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