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Review of M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 2007)

Gregory Nagy

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West's book is most useful for researchers in the Classics and in Indo-European studies. I have produced two different and mutually complementary reviews of it, one for Classicists and one for Indo-Europeanists, with the collegial permission of the book-review editors of *Classical Review* and *Indo-European Studies Bulletin*. In the present review for *IESB*, I concentrate on the usefulness of the book for those who are already well versed in Indo-European studies.

The book offers a synthesis of research done by Indo-Europeanists on poetic and mythmaking traditions as reflected in Indo-European languages. As such, it rivals other recent books about these traditions. Readers of the *IESB* will not need to be reminded of the more general book of Jaan Puhvel (1987) or of the more eclectic book of Calvert Watkins (1995). Nor will they need to be reminded of more narrowly focused work, such as the foundational books of Rüdiger Schmitt (1967) and Enrico Campanile (1977).

Also, readers of the *IESB* will already be familiar with such relevant books as the *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture (EIEC)* edited by J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams (1997).

West himself is familiar with all these works, though he is more at home with some, like the book of Watkins, and less at home with others, like the book of Puhvel. He is even less at home with the *EIEC*, except for articles by Mallory (as cited at p. 156).

West has not made use, however, of a new book that Mallory has co-authored with D. Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (2006). West must have finished his book, published by Oxford University Press, before he could take into account this new OUP book. Nor has West made use of two other relevant books that appeared even before the 2006 book of Mallory and Adams: the first of these is an English-language version of the important survey of Indo-European culture by Michael Meier-Brügger and his colleagues (2003), and the second is a new synthesis by B. W. Fortson (2004), which appears in the Blackwell Texts in Linguistics series (no. 19).

So the synthesis achieved by West is not completely up to date. Nor is it complete, for that matter, with regard to past research on Indo-European poetry and myth. There is much more to be said about the results already achieved by Indo-Europeanists, as also about the methods they use in achieving these results. From where I stand, I especially miss seeing references in this book to the works of Jean Kellens and Oktor Skjærvø (on Iranian traditions about Zoroaster, West pp. 14, 29, 304), Joseph Nagy (on Celtic traditions about Finn, West p. 430), and Richard P. Martin (on Greek traditions about the “ruler’s truth,” West pp. 422–424).

More generally, there is a sense of incompleteness in the treatment West gives to the research of Georges Dumézil. Although he is actually successful in applying some of the insights of Dumézil, West (p. 4) makes a point of distancing himself from this scholar’s methodology. By thus choosing to steer clear of Dumézil, West has missed many opportunities to solidify his own argumentation and insights. At the conclusion of this review, I give an example. For now, though, I simply note that my criticism here echoes what has already been pointed out in some detail in the review of West’s book by N. J. Allen in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2007.10.53). The critique by Allen highlights West’s resistance to the “structuralist” methodology applied by Dumézil to a wide variety of evidence, including texts often overlooked because they are not explicitly associated with myth and poetics. A notable example of such overlooked texts is the vast body of literature centering on early Roman “pseudo-history.”

A resistance to “structuralism” can be described more generally as a reluctance to engage with methods of analyzing language as a system. Such a structuralist methodology is exemplified by the formulation of the Indo-Europeanist Antoine Meillet (1921:16): “Une langue constitue un système complexe de moyens d’expression, système où tout se tient.” The methodology developed by Meillet in analyzing language as a system could be developed further: as he showed in his book on comparative Indo-European metrics, the analysis of language as a system could be applied also to the analysis of extensions of language, such as meter (Meillet 1923).

This methodology of Meillet is most relevant to what we find in West’s book concerning Indo-European metrics. West offers a thoroughgoing analysis and comparison of the meters that survive in ancient Greek and Indic poetry, reconstructing a variety of prototypical patterns on the basis of these two points of comparison. There is something missing, however, in these reconstructions. That something is the linguistic basis of these reconstructed prototypical patterns. To find such a basis, it is necessary to look at meters in the context of the traditional phraseology that they frame. If the poetics of meter and phraseology are treated not separately but together as parts of a unified system, then the rules of Greek and Indic poetry can be explained more clearly as cognate systems that derive from a common

source. Such a poetic common source is parallel to the linguistic common source as reconstructed on the basis of all attested Indo-European languages.

The methodology of treating metrical and phraseological behavior together as parts of a unified system stems from Milman Parry's approach to the concept of the Homeric "formula" (Parry 1928). As Charles de Lamberterie has shown (1997), Parry's approach was strongly influenced by Antoine Meillet. And this approach can rightly be described as "structuralist," since the approach of Meillet himself to language was in turn strongly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, who was the first to formulate the methodology that we know as "structuralism." The influence of Saussure on Meillet has been eloquently noted by Emile Benveniste (1966:93).

For Meillet as also for Saussure, reconstructions of patterns in language through time require a thorough understanding of constructions as they exist in a given language at a given time and place. Such an understanding is essential for seeing language as a system, and Meillet offers many illustrations in his masterful book, *La méthode comparative* (1925). In order to achieve such an understanding, a distinction needs to be maintained between synchronic and diachronic perspectives in the study of language. For Saussure, synchrony and diachrony designate respectively a current state of a language and a phase in its evolution: "Est synchronique tout ce qui se rapporte à l'aspect statique de notre science, diachronique tout ce qui a trait aux évolutions. De même synchronie et diachronie désigneront respectivement un état de langue et une phase d'évolution" (Saussure 1916:117).

This formulation of Saussure applies to the study of language as well as extensions of language such as meter and formula. And the use of the terms synchronic and diachronic in the study of meter and formula has to be as precise as it is in the study of language in general.

For the sake of precision, two further observations are needed at this point:

1. The perspective to be taken in using these terms synchronic and diachronic is that of an outsider who is thinking about a given system, not of an insider who is thinking within that system (Nagy 1990a:4).
2. The term diachronic is not synonymous with the term historical. Whereas a diachronic perspective can predict the potential for evolution in a structure, a historical perspective cannot, since history is not restricted to phenomena that are structurally predictable (Nagy 1990a:21n18).

With these two observations in place, I return to the treatment of meters in West's book, which is separate from his treatment of phraseology – of what Parry would call the formula. What I suggest is that West's results, impressive as they are, would be further enhanced by a unified treatment of meter and formula. Such an

analysis requires the application of both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, as I have argued in my own work on metrical and formulaic behavior in ancient Greek poetry, comparing this behavior with cognate patterns of behavior attested in ancient Indic poetry. As Watkins observes (1995:173): “Nagy in numerous publications (1974, 1979, 1990b) has rightly focused on the importance of distinguishing the synchronic and the diachronic in the study of formulas.” I mention my own relevant research in this context because I think that the results of this research are useful for confirming West’s argumentation about the common heritage of Greek and Indic meters. West’s own reference to this research (p. 408) indicates a recognition of this usefulness.

My observations about the need to maintain a distinction between synchronic and diachronic perspectives apply to other aspects of West’s reconstructions. A case in point is his analysis of what we know about war chariots on the basis of textual evidence collected primarily from Indic, Iranian, Greek, Germanic, and Celtic traditions of mythmaking and poetry. This textual evidence leads to a convincing reconstruction of a common tradition, which we would expect to be parallel to the common language reconstructed by Indo-Europeanists. But this textual evidence seems to be in conflict with the archaeological evidence, which points to the date of 2100–2000 BCE as the *terminus post quem* for the invention of war-chariots (pp. 23, 40, 115n125, 210, 468). Such a dating is for West “a devastating result” (p. 24). Why? Because the date of 2100–2000 BCE is far too late for a unified “Proto-Indo-European” language and culture. So what is to be done with West’s convincing reconstructions concerning the construction and the uses of war chariots on the basis of the textual evidence? I suggest that a slight re-adjustment of synchronic and diachronic perspectives might provide a satisfactory solution.

As a test case, let us consider metaphors referring to the sun as the wheel of a war-chariot. From a synchronic point of view, such references as we find them in separate text-samples of separate Indo-European languages show that the wheel in these metaphors is not necessarily to be visualized as the spoked wheel of a war chariot. It could just as well be visualized as the wheel of a block-wheeled wagon. And the dating of block-wheeled wagons can be taken as far back as 3300 BCE on the basis of archaeological evidence consulted by West (p. 40). So even if we find attested examples of metaphors referring to the sun as the wheel of a spoke-wheeled chariot, such attestations do not mean that the *terminus post quem* for the metaphor of the sun as a wheel has to be correlated with the invention of war-chariots.

Now let us switch from a synchronic to a diachronic point of view. We know, on the basis of comparing all attested words for ‘wheel’ in Indo-European languages, that the concept of ‘wheel’ is not restricted to any specific kind of vehicle that runs on wheels. A prime example is Latin *rota*, meaning ‘wheel’, which is etymologically an

action-noun derived from the unattested Italic verb **retō* meaning ‘run’; in the Celtic languages, the corresponding verb is still attested, as we see in the Irish form *rethid* ‘runs’. So even if the Indic noun *rátha-*, cognate of the Latin noun *rota*, happens to refer to a spoke-wheeled war chariot, that fact does not change the other fact that the Latin noun *rota* can refer to the wheel of any vehicle that runs on wheels.

In the case of Indic *rátha-*, what we see is a metonymy that leads from the concept of a wheel to the concept of a specific kind of vehicle that runs on wheels, and we see a parallel metonymy in the familiar case of German *Rad*, which can mean either ‘wheel’ or ‘bicycle’. But the fact that the referent of the Indic word *rátha-* happens to be a spoked-wheeled war-chariot in the texts that survive from ancient Indic civilization is not something that we could predict by way of diachronic model-building. It is a fact of history - in the sense of the “history” that is revealed for us by archaeology - that there was a technological revolution involving the construction and tactical use of war-chariots in the course of the second millennium BCE, and that this revolution affected a vast area of different populations speaking different Indo-European languages. These different languages, which had long ago been separated from each other, could react in parallel ways to parallel novelties. So the attestations, in several Indo-European languages, of the metaphor of the sun as the wheel of a spoke-wheeled war chariot can be viewed as an example of common innovation.

Mention of the era of the second millennium BCE brings me to an important aspect of West’s book. It has to do with his tracking of parallels between Greek and West Asiatic traditions in mythmaking and poetry, many of which can be traced back to that era. This tracking is a continuation of what he accomplished in an earlier book about comparanda involving Greek and West Asiatic traditions (1997), which in turn is a continuation of what he was doing even earlier in his commentaries on the Hesiodic *Theogony* (1966) and *Works and Days* (1978). His most recent work on such comparanda, as evidenced by the book under review, shows improvements on his earlier work. As I trace the evolution of West’s thinking across the wide chronological span of his publications to date, I find that he has been steadily moving away from his earlier practice of simply noting comparanda between Greek and West Asiatic traditions without offering explanations. Still, explanations in this area are often hard to come by, and, more often than not, West continues to refrain from exploring whether such comparanda are to be explained as cases of (1) “Sprachbund” or (2) typological parallelism. I have commented on relevant explanatory models in an article focusing on Greek concepts of the “epic hero” as derived from both Indo-European and non-Indo-European traditions (Nagy 2005a/b).

I conclude this review by returning, as I said I would, to the subject of West’s reluctance to engage with the works of Georges Dumézil. I bring up this subject again

without any intent to end on a negative note. In fact, my intent is to stress the positive by highlighting a specific example of the potential usefulness of Dumézil's methods and findings as support for West's own argumentation.

The example has to do with Dumézil's analysis in *Mythe et épopée* III (1973:305–330) of a ritual observed in Rome at dawn every year on June 11, on the occasion of the festival of the Italic goddess Mater Matuta. West (p. 226n104) cites this analysis in the context of examining the testimony of various ancient sources concerning the identification of Mater Matuta with the dawn goddess Aurora. West notes (p. 226) that the festival “began at dawn with the offering of cakes that were *flauua*, the same colour as Aurora,” referring to the relevant wording of Ovid (*Fasti* 6.473–6, *Amores* 1.13.2). Then West compares (p. 226 with reference to pp. 214–215) the Indic ritual practice of offering a cake on the occasion of the Vājapeya sacrifice, at the climax of which the royal sacrificer holds the cake and declares solemnly that he has reached the sun. Like the cake in the Indic ritual, West concludes, the cakes in the Italic ritual “may originally have been solar symbols” (p. 226). It is at this point that West cites Dumézil's analysis of the Italic ritual (p. 226n104), describing it as “an ingenious attempt to explain other features of the ritual [as well as the feature of the cake offering] in terms of the mythology of Dawn.” West is reluctant here to accept fully the correlation between the rituals and myths connected with the Italic dawn goddess because he is skeptical about such a correlation in the case of the cognate figure of the Indic dawn goddess Uṣas. West has this to say about Uṣas (p. 225): “Dawn is not a goddess of cult.” He goes on to say that “she was hymned at the Vedic morning sacrifice because it was that time of day, but she was not the object of the ceremony.” Such a narrow view of ritual or “cult” can be broadened, however, in the light of Dumézil's analysis of the Italic rituals and myths concerning the dawn goddess. And such a broadening of perspective has the advantage of enabling researchers to treat myth and ritual as aspects of an integral system of thinking about the cosmos. This way, you can have your ritual and your myth together. You can have your cake and eat it too. And then you can read Dumézil and West together.

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