



Bruce Lincoln (1999). *Theorizing Myth*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press) Pp. xv + 298. \$59.00. ISBN 0226482014

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Theorizing Myth is a book with multiple concerns, but its most important project (and hence that on which I shall concentrate) is its review of scholarship on what we should nowadays call Indo-European studies from their inception to the present day.

This part of the book begins in chapter 3, which (following some enlightening inquiries into the status of *logos* and *mythos* in the ancient world) takes the story of the development of attitudes towards myth from the Renaissance to the Second World War. Though I am not qualified to criticise this particular section of Lincoln's work in detail, the less than three pages in which he sketches developments from antiquity to the Enlightenment seem rather inadequate (47-49). He follows this, however, with a good outline of the place of myth in the Romantic *Weltanschauung* and its mystical links with the concepts of *Volk* and *Vaterland*. He pays particular attention to the anti-Semitic patina of the writings of Wagner *et al.*

It is in these pages that Lincoln lays the foundations for his critique of the Indo-European 'discourse', which he defines on page 74 as comprising five elements, worth citing in detail: 'Herder's notion of *Volk* as an entity defined by shared myths, language, homeland and physiognomy'; 'an ancient "Aryan" or "Indo-European" *Ursprache*'; 'the assumption that an *Ursprache* necessarily implies the existence of an *Urvolk*, *Urheimat*, a set of *Urmythen*, and also an *Urphysiologie*'; 'the motivating context of nascent nationalism'; and 'the tendency to contrast the myths, languages, and bodies of one's own *Volk* to those of other peoples', generally Jews.

It is beyond question that Lincoln is to a large extent quite correct about this 'discourse'; but he is also being remarkably tendentious, and will continue to be so. By separating out and analysing the different components of the Aryan/Indo-European discourse, he implicitly recognises that, like any such discourse, it was complex, multi-layered and potentially fluid. It was an *à la carte* rather than a *table d'hôte* menu: its constituent elements supported and reinforced each other, but they were in principle (and often in practice) quite separable. It might even be more profitable to speak of a bundle of interacting discourses. Lincoln is aware of this fact (indeed, he specifically notes that the fifth element was not always present), but he does not draw out its implications.

Chapter 4 should provide sobering reading for anyone whose introduction to Indo-European studies came through reading some handbook of comparative philology casually citing Sir William Jones' 'sprung from some common source' speech. God said, Let Jones be, and all was light? No: as Lincoln rightly notes, Jones' place within the history both of linguistics and of Aryan/Indo-Europeanist racialism is anything but simple or innocent. Lincoln is, however, just and well-balanced, and even defends Jones against Edward Said (84). Chapter 5 takes the story into the Nineteenth Century with a discussion of Nietzsche and his "Blond Beast", and

Chapter 6 lands us in the Twentieth with Dumézil's "German War God" (pages 128-137 contain an ingenious if rather strained reading of Dumézil's *Mitra-Varuna* and *Mythes et dieux des Germains* in the light of 1930s politics).

Part of Lincoln's project is to problematise the notion that Indo-European studies have been 'sanitized' since the demise of Nazi Germany (cf. xiv, 94f), yet it is a task in which he frankly fails. The discourse - or rather, the configuration of discourses- has developed and evolved if not out of recognition, certainly beyond the point at which one can credibly argue that buying into it necessarily implicates one- to any extent - in the ugly racism of a Chamberlain or a Rosenberg. A scholar as exceptionally learned and intelligent as Lincoln, who has himself produced some very distinguished work within the modern Indo-European discourse, must know this perfectly well, but, as we will see, he has some (admittedly very good) reasons for ignoring it.

Even within Lincoln's own text, however, we see tensions and contradictions. Numerous left-leaning scholars with extensive publication records in the Indo-European field exist - one thinks of Bernard Sergent, for example, and Daniel Dubuisson - and cannot by any stretch of the imagination be labelled as Nazi sympathisers. They also cannot be ignored, and Lincoln has to bury several of them in endnote 18 on page 260 before proceeding to recount the involvement in radical right-wing politics of some of Dumézil's contemporaries (Jan de Vries, Stig Wikander *et al.*) and note that a small number of present-day racists interest themselves in things Indo-European (121-127). Lincoln is also aware of the incongruity of associating the Jewish scholar Émile Benveniste with (quasi-)Nazi *Blut und Boden* ideologising, but he can scarcely ignore someone of Benveniste's stature, and so buries him safely in another note (258 n.1), which in this case also keeps Gregory Nagy, Calvert Watkins and several others at a discreet distance from the main text.

Lincoln returns to the Indo-European question in his epilogue, in which he repeats an earlier contention that we should not naïvely accept the traditional conception of a discrete Indo-European *Urvolk* with a distinctive language, culture and ethnicity (211-216; cf. 95 with n.67). He admittedly acknowledges that he is defending a minority opinion, but he does not attempt seriously to engage with objections which might be made against his position; moreover, he continues to give the impression that he is working with a theory of academic *miasma* which deems almost any strand of Indo-European studies which strays outside the narrowly philological to be in some sense tainted.

It is not unreasonable, let alone racist, to believe that a Proto-Indo-European language was once spoken (whatever relationship it actually bore to the **blH₁-aoi_wg-* type reconstructions found in linguistics textbooks), or that the term 'Indo-European culture' may usefully be employed by scholars, or that Dumézil was essentially right that a distinctive 'Indo-European' ideological pattern existed, or that there was ever such a people as 'the Indo-Europeans'. After all, differences in language, culture and ideology are alike markers of social distance which frequently occur together in demarcating discrete human groups. It may even be that the 'Indo-Europeans' were ethnically distinct, though their ethnic affiliations are surely a matter of complete indifference to most modern scholars and students (they certainly are to this one).

The foregoing criticisms can be summed up roughly thus: don't read Lincoln if you want a judicious, impartial introduction to the modern discipline of Indo-European studies. Though I believe that this is an observation worth making, in an important way it misses the point, for *Theorizing Myth* possesses real value of a different (higher?) kind. Lincoln does not conceal his political agenda - he explicitly

refers in the preface to his Jewish background: xii-xiii - and it is an agenda undoubtedly worth pursuing. As he reminds us, 'more than ink was spilled' in the last century by men (and women) caught up in the Indo-European discourse(s) (215f).

Theorizing Myth I found profoundly unsatisfactory as a means of making sense of contemporary Indo-European scholarship, but as a cautionary tale or an extended warning it is powerful and salutary. The importance of the point which Lincoln is making makes me almost ashamed at my whining about how irritating and tendentious his text can sometimes be: *Theorizing Myth* would in a real sense be a worse book were it not so over-the-top. The initial draft of this review contained a rather cheap sneer at Lincoln's tendency to dig up rotting corpses in order to berate them; dangerously naïve, however, is the assumption that those corpses could never again return to life.