PROPHECY AND PERSONS:
READING CHARACTER IN THE *ODYSSEY*

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But for its outrageous alliteration, this essay should perhaps be titled "Prophecy, Persons, Plot, Penelope, and Postmodernism." I shall indeed be touching on all these topics, and the real focus of my remarks will be Penelope; in particular, why we don't know what she will do until she does it—in a story where everyone else's moves are forecast long before the event. But in what sounds paradoxical, but is only apparently so, I shall not have much to say about Penelope in detail. That is largely because a number of people have done that admirably and in considerable detail, three of whom are contributors to this volume: Lillian Doherty (1995), Nancy Felson (1997), and Sheila Murnaghan (1987, esp. 118–47).[1] My remarks here are but modest reflections on theirs, what I would call a frame designed to set off their work with some more general considerations about the way we read character in and *into* fiction. And that will allow me to make another quick pass at a topic that has haunted my entire scholarly life, the relation between fiction and so-called real life, that is, the relation between literary text and non-literary context, both at the front end—the context of verisimilar constraints on the artist's production, and at the back end—the context of belief, behavior, and worldview shaped anew by the text as model. In my study of the way in which prophecy is used in Greek narrative, what has become a dominant theme is the intimate connection between prophecy and character. There is, first of all, the obvious way in which people's responses to omens and prophecies become keys to their characters, as, for fairly obvious

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1   See also Helene Foley 1995, Katz 1991, Winkler 1990.129–61, and Zeitlin 1995.

instances, with Aegisthus and Polyphemus in Homer, Croesus in Herodotus, and Oedipus and Jocasta in Sophocles (Peradotto 1974, esp. 823f.). There is, further, the way that character is inferred backward from action, just as prophecy in literature is, in composition, produced backward from outcome to prediction, though in performance it is presented forward from prediction to outcome (Peradotto 1992.10–11 and 1993.97–98). However, what I am mainly concerned with here is the way in which, whether in what we call "real life" or in our reading of fiction, we infer character, which is to say, make predictions about how a person may be counted on to act, from present or past signs (sometimes precious few of them) at our disposal. Now prophecy, as we find it in Greek literature, tends for the most part to operate the same way, reading the future, less by a direct vision of it than by making inspired inferences from its seeds or signs. In the words of Heraclitus, ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει, "The lord [Apollo] whose oracle is in Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign" (frag. 93 DK). A Euripidean fragment suggests the same thing: μάντις δ᾽ ἄριστος ὅστις εἰκάζει καλῶς, "The best seer is one who makes competent inferences" (frag. 973).

What are the seeds or signs that we read in judging character? Basically they are of two kinds. One, the simpler but more precarious, is the summation someone else provides us with. The other is a set of acts that we ourselves have witnessed or, in the case of fiction, that we have seen dramatically presented by a more or less objective narrator, presumed to be trustworthy.[2] In the simplest folktales of the kind analyzed by Vladimir Propp in his well-known study (1968), where character is superseded by function, characters are simply what the narrator *says* they are categorically, without explanation, motivation, or development. Now, in the *Odyssey*, as close as we get to this kind of character presentation is the case of Elpenor. The narrative function of Elpenor's death is clearly to provide a reason for Odysseus's return from the realm of the dead to Circe, who will then give him directions and warnings in Book 12 regarding the next several stages in his journey home.[3] As for Elpenor's characterization, Odysseus, whose

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2   The trustworthiness and objectivity of narrators is a critical can of worms that would distract us to open here. For the *Odyssey*, I generally though not exclusively mean the poem's master narrator, "Homer" if you will, as opposed to its *internal* narrators, whose veracity, objectivity, and trustworthiness we will often have to take with some suspicion.

3   Of course, what she does here is something Tiresias was supposed to have done in Book 11. On this problem, see Peradotto 1990.60–61.

veracity we have little reason to distrust (at least on this particular point), simply describes him as the youngest of his companions, not very distinguished in armed combat, and, where good judgment is concerned, not too well equipped either (10.552–53):

> Ἐλπήνωρ δέ τις ἔσκε νεώτατος, οὔτε τι λίην
> ἄλκιμος ἐν πολέμῳ οὔτε φρεσὶν ᾗσιν ἀρηρώς.

Even his name suggests as much: Elpenor, "Illusion-man," and the use of the perfect participle (ἀρηρώς) implies that, in the speaker's mind, Elpenor's condition is fixed and more or less permanent. None of this yields a characterization designed to win our sympathies. What then follows in Odysseus's narrative is an outcome one might expect to result from such a character: Elpenor gets drunk and falls asleep on Circe's roof. In the morning, forgetting where he is, he walks off the edge and breaks his neck. So undistinguished is he that, as the fleet sets sail for the river Ocean and the realm of the dead, his absence is not even noticed.

With the more complex situation of Aegisthus[4] we move away a bit from the simple folktale model of characterization, inasmuch as he is represented dramatically as disregarding ample warnings of the dire consequences his plans entail. The only time Aegisthus is characterized by the master narrator (the term I shall use to distinguish him from internal narrators), it is as ἀμύμων, "blameless," early in the poem (1.29).[5] Except for that instance, Aegisthus is never represented to us except in terms that are morally negative and through the eyes of internal narrators, none of them disinterested. What is more important, our view of Aegisthus is so carefully

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4 The close correspondence between Aegisthus and Odysseus in the tradition needs further study. In the *Odyssey*, although they are represented as paradigms—each at opposite ends of the moral spectrum in regard to Zeus's theory of human suffering—there are some not insignificant likenesses: both are motivated by presumably legitimate vengeance; both are experts at δόλος (what is the difference between πολύμητις and δολόμητις?); one kills a bard, the other almost does so; both are urged to restraint by direct divine intervention.

5 We needn't concern ourselves with the old controversy over this appellation that, though it can clearly convey strong moral approbation, seems here to suggest nothing more than the distinction of Aegisthus's social class, analogous to the word's usage for distinction in a particular skill (as in μάντις ἀμύμων) or the quality of a product (as in ἀμύμονα ἔργα ἰδυῖα used of a woman skilled in handiwork). After all, that monster of impiety, Salmoneus, who tries to pass himself off as Zeus, is called ἀμύμων and his daughter Tyro εὐπατέρεια (*Od.* 11.235–36).

controlled as to inhibit our entertaining the slightest thought about the justification for his actions—justification that, of course, Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon* will allow him to make for himself. He is not even graced with the sympathy Elpenor eventually evokes in his conversation with Odysseus among the dead (11.51–83). One wonders whether, in the epic tradition behind the *Odyssey*, there were accounts that allowed Aegisthus the kind of justification we find in Aeschylus. The odds are probably against it, though we cannot say for sure. The cynical view is that, in an oral tradition, no character could be portrayed as more irredeemable than someone who dares to murder an oral poet—which is what Aegisthus does (3.270–71).

       With Clytemnestra things get still more complicated. As in Aegisthus's case, our view of her is largely shaped by internal, hardly disinterested narrators. And about the powerful justification that Aeschylus allows her to make—the sacrificial slaughter of Iphigeneia—the story is absolutely silent (although it is known in the *Cypria* and, even earlier, in the Hesiodic *Ehoiai* [Hes. frag. 23 MW], where a daughter Iphideme, clearly a variant of Iphigeneia, is said to have been sacrificed). But there is a major difference between Clytemnestra's portrayal and Aegisthus's. In the case of one internal narrator, the most disinterested of those who speak of her, namely Nestor, we get the intimation of character development from praiseworthy to blameworthy, and, what is more important, of the causes that brought the change about (3.263–72). Nestor says that before Aegisthus's persistent campaign of seduction (θέλγεσκεν), Clytemnestra would have eschewed the unseemly conduct that followed (τὸ πρὶν μὲν ἀναίνετο ἔργον ἀεικές), for she was possessed of an upright character (φρεσὶ γὰρ κέχρητ᾽ ἀγαθῇσι), an expression that is precisely the antithesis of that used of Elpenor. Note that the use of the perfect tense (κέχρητ᾽), as in Elpenor's case, suggests a fixed and permanent condition. But, Nestor goes on to say, once the gods had fastened the crushing bonds of fate (ὅτε δή μιν μοῖρα θεῶν ἐπέδησε δαμῆναι) and the bard her custodian had been eliminated, then she yielded to Aegisthus of her own accord (ἐθέλουσαν). Nestor later concludes by referring to her as στυγερή, "despicable" (3.310).

       Now we have to be on our guard here no less in Nestor's evaluation than in that of a far less disinterested internal narrator like Agamemnon's shade, for while we expect Agamemnon to be excessively harsh in his judgment, Nestor, given the way he is characterized, may be suspected of erring, if at all, on the side of forbearance. In Book 4, Menelaus, it should be noted, says nothing negative about Clytemnestra either in his own voice or in his report of Proteus's account, and we should probably infer that this is

out of deference to her sister Helen. We must keep reminding ourselves of the obvious but important observation that in reading character, whether in texts or in so-called real life, the observer's and narrator's personal predispositions, interests, and purposes play a crucial role and must be factored in. I mean not only the way we have to factor in Nestor's and Menelaus's character in assessing their judgment of Clytemnestra but—a more difficult complication—the way in which reading is affected by our own or any reader's predisposing attitudes about the kind of character Nestor or Menelaus shows, or what we know of Clytemnestra from other sources, or how we respond emotionally and judgmentally to the actions and sufferings witnessed or described: in short, the variable set of cultural rules we use to make judgments about character. I shall return to this issue below.

For the moment, let us stay with Clytemnestra. We have noted that she moves from a praiseworthy to a blameworthy state under the seductive influence of Aegisthus. A nearly identical pattern shows up in the case of Eumaeus's nurse, as he tells disguised Odysseus the story of his kidnapping and enslavement as a child (15.403ff., esp. 417–22). His nurse was, Eumaeus says, tall and beautiful and knowledgeable in glorious handiwork, but some low-life Phoenician merchants came to town and her head was turned by intercourse with one of them while doing the laundry. That's the way women are, Eumaeus generalizes; sex befuddles their better judgment (φρένες), even the best of them:

> ἔσκε δὲ πατρὸς ἐμοῖο γυνὴ Φοίνισσ᾽ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ,
> καλή τε μεγάλη τε καὶ ἀγλαὰ ἔργα ἰδυῖα·
> τὴν δ᾽ ἄρα Φοίνικες πολυπαίπαλοι ἠπερόπευον.
> πλυνούσῃ τις πρῶτα μίγη κοίλῃ παρὰ νηὶ
> εὐνῇ καὶ φιλότητι, τά τε φρένας ἠπεροπεύει
> θηλυτέρῃσι γυναιξί, καὶ ἥ κ᾽ εὐεργὸς ἔῃσιν.

Now keep in mind that our internal narrator, Eumaeus, is anything but disinterested, for the woman's behavior transformed his life dramatically from high nobility to the status of a slave, a tender of hogs. And, beyond that, the story shows the general ethnic contempt that all Phoenicians seem to excite in Homeric heroic society.[6] However, what is more to our purpose

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6　On this subject, see Winter 1995.

here is the general characterization of women that Eumaeus expresses. It is, of course, also expressed by Agamemnon's shade at much greater length and in much more vehement terms, understandably so for someone murdered from ambush by his wife and her adulterous lover. But Eumaeus's way of putting it has the quick offhandedness one associates with culturally uncontested facts, with something hardly anyone would think to quarrel about.

This relatively easy moral swing from good to bad, nearly always brought on by sexual seduction or fixation, shows up in other female characters. Clytemnestra's sister Helen is an interesting case in this regard, if for no other reason than that she swings back again, or at least seems to do so. In Book 23, Penelope's view[7] of her shows as much forbearance as Nestor of Clytemnestra. Some god, she says, must have prompted Helen to her indecent actions, since before that her mind had been free of such ruinous tendencies (23.222–24):

> τὴν δ᾽ ἦ τοι ῥέξαι θεὸς ὤρορεν ἔργον ἀεικές·
> τὴν δ᾽ ἄτην οὐ πρόσθεν ἑῷ ἐγκάτθετο θυμῷ
> λυγρήν.

Similarly, in Book 4, Menelaus suggests divine compulsion in Helen's behavior, particularly when she tested the wooden horse for hidden Greeks, though his graciousness is edged with carefully studied irony: "Then you came on the scene," he says to her, as he tells the story for Telemachus and Peisistratus as well, "probably at the prompting of some god who wanted kudos for the Trojans" (4.274–75):

> ἦλθες ἔπειτα σὺ κεῖσε· κελευσέμεναι δέ σ᾽ ἔμελλε
> δαίμων, ὃς Τρώεσσιν ἐβούλετο κῦδος ὀρέξαι.

Just a few moments before, at the end of Helen's account of how she had helped the disguised Odysseus on his secret foray into Troy, she had offered the same explanation, divine compulsion, for her behavior, lacing it with such obsequious praise of Menelaus that it is hard to believe he would give it any credit. "My heart," she says, "had changed by then; I wanted to go back

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7 The best discussions of this are in Murnaghan 1987.141–42, Katz 1991.182–87, Felson 1997.40, Doherty 1995.49–50, Zeitlin 1995.143–45.

home and I regretted the madness Aphrodite'd put on me, when she took me to Troy, away from my own dear fatherland, deserting my child, my bridal chamber, and a husband lacking in nothing, no, not in quality of mind or bodily grace" (4.260–64):

> . . . ἤδη μοι κραδίη τέτραπτο νέεσθαι
> ἂψ οἶκόνδ᾽, ἄτην δὲ μετέστενον, ἣν Ἀφροδίτη
> δῶχ᾽, ὅτε μ᾽ ἤγαγε κεῖσε φίλης ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης,
> παῖδά τ᾽ ἐμὴν νοσφισσαμένην θάλαμόν τε πόσιν τε
> οὔ τευ δευόμενον, οὔτ᾽ ἂρ φρένας οὔτε τι εἶδος.

By contrast to her appearance here in the *Odyssey*, the complex inner conflict between her sexual susceptibility and her better judgment is treated with far more thoughtfulness in the *Iliad* (3.383–420).

Several other women—mythic paradigms of moral instability, sexually motivated and ruinous to fathers or husbands—climax Odysseus's catalogue of female shades encountered in the realm of the dead: Phaedra, Ariadne, Procris, and Eriphyle (11.321–26). Allusion to them arguably serves as a kind of overture to Odysseus's next ghostly encounter, Agamemnon, with his tale of murder by his wife and her lover.

In this context of moral oscillation, mainly sexually motivated, we should not forget Circe, whose movement is as dramatic but in the opposite direction: from malice to benevolence. Nor should we forget that when Calypso complains (5.116ff.) about male gods' dismay over the subversive sexual initiative of their female counterparts, the Homeric male's apprehension about female instability is being heavily underscored. The same goes, of course, for the Ares-Aphrodite fabliau (8.266–366) where Aphrodite dives into bed with Ares as soon as her husband Hephaestus appears to be away from home.

The picture I am trying to sketch here is this: broadly speaking, male figures are represented as more or less fixed with respect to their moral character. One does not see significant movement from one end of the moral spectrum to the other. Not so with women. Their volatility, their potential for significant moral swings, mainly motivated by sex, seems to be a cultural given. It is just such a perspective as this that provides a background for puzzlement, for indeterminacy, for suspense over exactly what Penelope will finally do. In a story where virtually every other outcome is predicted, nothing allows us to predict, to prophesy with assurance, what she will do until it actually happens. This, together with certain indications in our extant

non-Homeric evidence, should lead us to wonder if, in the tradition behind the *Odyssey*, her character and behavior were less *fixed* than, say, Aegisthus's or even Clytemnestra's is likely to have been. After all, there is the Arcadian tradition that suggests that she was, in fact, an adulteress.[8]

My purpose so far, to recall my opening remarks, has been to sketch out the cultural framework against which Penelope's character acquires its suspense, not to discuss her character in any proper detail. Among the scholars who have investigated Penelope, Nancy Felson (1997) and Marylin Katz (1991) have probably done the most to alert us to the unpredictability and indeterminacy in the way the *Odyssey* represents her. What little I will add at this point are some more general reflections on the way we read character, and especially on what relationship the depiction of character in fiction may have to what we call "real life."

Our reading of character is, of course, a subset of the larger body of cultural rules for interpreting experience that we call verisimilitude. What distinguishes it most from the rest, however, is the way we interpolate, the way we fill in the "blanks," as it were, based on the inner experience of our own character: that deep, individual core that does not surface, either because we succeed in keeping it secret or fail in our attempts to communicate it. Our own scripting of reality prompts us to hypothesize or attribute motives to others where they are not altogether clear. It also prompts us to replay, distort, refashion, reproduce, remake our own motives and fabricate our own character in retrospect. Despite the general uniformity of our cultural rules of interpretation in this regard, each of us will fill in the blanks differently. Let me cite, as an extreme case, the way that Charles Boer reads Penelope in his forward to the reprint of Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme* (Boer 1992.viii):

> Not that one has much sympathy for [Penelope], in her dopey narcoleptic trances falling asleep every few minutes when a crisis occurs—this may be how Mediterranean men fantasize their wives really are when they're away, and what they want them to be like—but . . . we'll take Helen any day over the dizzy housewife.[9]

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8   See Mactoux 1975 and, most recently, Friedricksmeyer 1997, who argues that "Homer alludes to an epichoric tradition that blames Penelope and denies it in favor of his own panhellenic account which praises her, above all in order to stress that she had real alternatives in her relationship with Odysseus."

9   Stanford, I suspect, would roll over in his grave at that, would he not?

Individual character would seem, by definition, to be precisely the unclassifiable, the irreducible residue that remains when all generic, classificatory, categorizing predication has been exhausted. It is *sui generis*. If it is not unknowable, its intelligibility has been the focus of fierce debate involving the oldest and most persistent of philosophical problems, the compatibility of sameness and change. In the context of narrative (and perhaps also of "real life"), there are those who, like Roland Barthes, in a text that I cited with approval when I wrote *Man in the Middle Voice,* link this residue to what Barthes called an "ideology of the person" (1974.191), which tries to mask the fact that what we call the person is no more than a collection of generic adjectives, attributes, predicates, speech patterns. What gives the illusion that there is something individual and ineffable underlying these attributes and predicates is the proper name. This point is made neatly by Claude Bremond: "The agent is a person; but the person (or the proper name which designates it) is itself dispossessed of any stable property. Its descriptive character is reduced to a minimum. As a person, the agent is no one." In French, a provocative paradox: "Etant une personne, l'agent n'est personne!"[10]

Those put off by the Gallic acidity of these representations of character may find, perhaps, more intelligibility but certainly no more comfort in William Gass's expression of the same idea. Let me paraphrase him, substituting Penelope for the Henry James character he originally used as an example (Gass 1970.44):

> What is Penelope? Here is the answer I shall give: Penelope is (1) a noise, (2) a proper name, (3) a complex system of ideas, (4) a controlling conception, (5) an instrument of verbal organization, (6) a pretended mode of referring, (7) a source of verbal energy. But Penelope is not a person.

Note more closely number 6: "a pretended mode of referring." Is Penelope an acceptable or credible *representation* of some non-literary reality? An acceptable or credible *representation* of some non-Odyssean reality? I return to this most complicated of questions at the end of my remarks.

By the time our classical evidence gets around to speaking reflectively of *character*, it tends to be identified with what we would call

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10 Bremond 1973.104. He is summarizing a discussion of the issue by Todorov 1969.27–28.

the typical or even the stereotypical: the kinds of predictable, readily classifiable types one finds in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, even more obviously in Theophrastus, in the new comedy of his pupil Menander, and Menander's legacy in Roman comedy. There is an early exception. One way of reading the famous Heraclitus fragment, ἦθος ἀνθρώπῳ δαίμων (frag. 119 DK), is that ἦθος is not distinguishable from δαίμων, nor presumably any more or any less subject to predictability, classification, calibration, determination. That is a notion, I believe, that is more compatible with what, in a contemporary context, most of us think of as *interesting* about a character, whether we are talking about literary or real characters, whether we are literary critics (especially French ones) or not, whether we bristle at words like "indeterminacy" and "deconstruction" or not. That is surely what Hélène Cixous is driving at when she says (1974.384):

> If "I"—true subject, subject of the unconscious[11]—am what I can be, "I" am always on the run. It is precisely this open, unpredictable, piercing part of the subject, this *infinite* potential to rise up, that the "concept" of "character" excludes in advance.

It is precisely the secret, impenetrable, unavailable, absent, presumably *central* part of the self that piques our interest, perhaps precisely because it imposes—perhaps some might say *inflicts*—interpretation on us. More than that: it forces us to re-examine all our inherited, conventional notions of consistency, unity, determinacy, plausibility. Sometimes the less said about a character, the more interested we become. Take for instance that anonymous, lightly clad young follower of Jesus in Mark's gospel,[12] who slips from his captors in Gethsemane to escape naked, or, at the other end of the vestimentary spectrum, the mysterious "man in the Mackintosh" whom James Joyce seems to have placed in his *Ulysses* for no other conceivable purpose than to provoke reams of critical speculation on who he is or what he's doing there. (By the way, Joyce's early commentator, Stuart Gilbert, thought the man in the Mackintosh was the *Odyssey*'s problematical prophet

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11 This means, of course, that it is difficult of access not only to the outside world but even to the self.

12 "And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked" (Mark 14:51–52). For an excellent treatment of this passage and of the "man in the Mackintosh" in Joyce's *Ulysses*, see Kermode 1979.49–73.

Theoclymenus in modern dress! And in this context, the austere allusiveness of the catalogue of women in Book 11 cannot help but generate more than passing speculation.) Even in the popular press, the monstrous crimes that rivet our attention most are those perpetrated by people who do not look the part: a frail, six-year-old, redheaded waif with a freckled, angelic face tortures and kills a three-year-old; a three-letter athlete and straight-A honors student butchers his parents. "He was always such a nice, quiet, courteous boy," his stunned neighbors and teachers try to tell us. (Sounds like Nestor on Clytemnestra or Penelope on Helen, doesn't it?) Now, by contrast, what we think of as really "boring" characters: aren't they those whose conventional, stereotypic actions and speech require minimal inter-pretation of us? Such characters are as "unmarked" as their speech, as predictable as arithmetic. But interesting characters are "marked"; they are *other*; they put us into a mental mode of defamiliarization, a heightening of active awareness that dissolves the lethargic torpor and erosion of meaning resulting from habitual usage and perception. It is precisely the θαῦμα, the disorienting shock, the kind of amazement that takes hold of Penelope and her suitors at the dramatically *unexpected* words and behavior of Telemachus in *Odyssey* 1; it is the same kind of θαῦμα that, in the *Poetics,* Aristotle says takes hold of us in the face of what happens παρὰ τὴν δόξαν, the same θαῦμα that, in his *Metaphysics,* spurs the philosophical search for under-standing.

Several years ago in an APA panel on Penelope, Marylin Katz cited some notorious lines from Alexander Pope's "Second Epistle to a Lady."

> Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
> "Most Women have no Characters at all."
> Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
> And best distinguish'd by black, brown, or fair.

I submit to you now what I said then in a response to her paper, that from the perspective I have adopted, Pope's remarks, no matter what his intentions, no matter what their reception in his era, turn into a ringing encomium. "Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear" is *interesting*. Paradoxically, this "matter" *is* powerfully "marked," precisely by its presumed inability to bear a mark! The same goes for Gildersleeve's (1907) notorious reference to Penelope's speech (especially at 23.175–76)[13] as "feminine syntax," by

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13 23.175–76: μάλα δ᾽ εὖ οἶδ᾽ οἷος ἔησθα / ἐξ Ἰθάκης ἐπὶ νηὸς ἰὼν δολιχηρέτμοιο.

which he means "emotional," "confused," "irregular." Gildersleeve and others may be troubled by emotion, confusion, irregularity, but there's no question their attention has been gotten!

However, there is, I believe, a limit to confusion and irregularity beyond which intelligibility is impaired, and this brings me in closing to the crucial concept of mimesis. Here is where I have to part company with Barthes and Cixous and take my stand with Paul Ricoeur. In Barthes and Cixous, we have what strikes me as a counsel of despair, for mimesis is viewed as nothing but authoritarian and repressive, a cultural cage. As they represent it, it imprisons us in fixed positions within existing historical structures and conventions. Such a world, by reason of its familiarity, is closed to analysis and criticism. Mimesis so understood cannot lead to productive knowledge about the world, to productive interpretation and understanding of persons. By contrast, Ricoeur, in a reading of mimesis that rehabilitates Aristotle, sees it not as a simple copy of what is culturally given but rather as a cognitive shaping capable of realizing what is incomplete or unrealized or merely potential in the given of experience. Christopher Prendergast argues that, in this respect, Ricoeur sees mimesis "performing the same cognitive function as *metaphor*: they are both modes of active disclosure." Both are "*discovery procedures*, heuristic mechanisms for re-presenting and re-describing the world."[14] They produce new configurations of nature, action, and character, new forms of knowledge and understanding. In Ricoeur's words (1984.59), "One of the oldest functions of art is that it constitutes an ethical laboratory where the artist pursues through the mode of fiction experimentation with values." N. J. Lowe, in a fine recent study of classical plotting (2000.127), argues that "the most persuasive narrative systems are capable of actually reversing the cognitive relationship between our reading of fiction and our reading of life. Instead of merely importing our understanding of the outer world to help us make sense of a fictional world, we re-export the fictional world's rules to the world of experience." Thus Aristotle's εἰκός, "verisimilitude," far from necessarily being in Barthes's words a "deliberately degraded logic," a resigned concession to popular culture, is rather what Ricoeur calls a "pre-understanding common to the artist and his or her public" of what character and action signify.[15] Umberto Eco, in his most recent work (2000.5), opts for a similar stance that he calls

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14 Prendergast 1986.21. Prendergast's entire discussion of mimesis is excellent, and his discussion of Ricoeur is often considerably more accessible than Ricoeur himself.
15 Ricoeur 1981.20. Compare Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, 1977.72–95.

"contractual realism." This notion of mimesis is completely compatible with formalist and deconstructionist notions of *defamiliarization* and *disruption*. On the other hand, the relation of reference to a world known and *held in common* is maintained. It serves as the *condition of intelligibility* of even the most transgressive of fictions.

For those who reject this course and also eschew the version of mimesis as cultural repression, the only alternative, it seems to me, is a world of senseless particularity of a kind cherished, in the realm of character, by an extreme and destructive individualism, and which some advocates of postmodernism have been accused of cultivating. It is chillingly depicted in one of Borges's strangest characters, Funes el memorioso, a man with a prodigious and unfailing memory (1998.136–37):

> He had effortlessly learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars—and they were virtually *immediate* particulars . . . Not only was it difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol *dog* embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front). His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him every time he saw them . . . He was the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform, instantaneous and almost intolerably precise world.

In the story, Funes dies of pulmonary congestion. Wasn't it something like that that killed off Heraclitus?[16]

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16 Diog. Laert. 9.3.