

**Lies and the Ithacan Liar Who Tells Them:
Cretan Lies and the Poetry of Action in Homer's *Odyssey***

Certainly one of the most charming scenes in all of Western literature occurs in Book XIII of Homer's *Odyssey* when the mortal Odysseus and the goddess Athene share a moment of mutual deception and recognition that leads to a kind of *tour de force* celebration of the wily art of lying. Herself physically disguised in the form of a young shepherd, Athene provokes in Odysseus one of his typical verbal disguises: unknowingly deposited at long last in his native Ithaca, Odysseus claims to be a recently-arrived, booty-carrying Cretan fugitive who has killed a son of the king of Crete. In response to this characteristically Odyssean lie, Athene irrepressibly smiles, fondly reaches her hand out to Odysseus, and instantaneously likens her body to a woman “[l]ovely and tall and skilled in glorious tasks” (XIII.289). She then says,

“Cunning would he be and deceitful, who could overreach you
In various wiles, and even if a god should confront you.
Versatile-minded wretch, insatiate in wiles, you would not
Cease from deceits though you are in your own land,
Or from fraudulent stories that from the ground up are dear to you.” (XIII.291-295)¹

In praising Odysseus's versatile-minded wiliness, Athene celebrates the homecoming of Ithaca's long-lost leader, the precise kind of leader that, twenty-six hundred years or so after Homer, Oscar Wilde hoped would reappear in the late nineteenth century:

That some change will take place before this century has drawn to its close we have no doubt whatsoever. Bored by the tedious and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance, tired of the intelligent person whose reminiscences are always based on memory, whose statements are invariably limited by probability, and who is at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest Philistine who happens to be present, Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar. (144)

¹ Eva Brann translates these lines somewhat more evocatively than Cook: “‘Dangerous man, dappily-devising [*poikilometis*: diverse-planning], ever-avid for wiles! You are not about to stop – even though you are on your own soil – your deceitful and thievish tale-telling that is dear to you from the ground up” (Brann 233).

(Wilde, by the way, would certainly have been willing to transform himself, Athene-like, into either a young shepherd or a lovely and tall woman in order to return society to its lost leader-liar.) Whether or not a Wildean “cultured and fascinating liar” would make a competent social leader, indeed whether or not Odysseus will be able successfully to lead in Ithaca after his return, is an open question (though Odysseus does seem to have been a successful leader prior to sailing for Troy); regardless, the lying Odysseus, who undeniably possesses what Wilde calls the “wit to exaggerate” and the “genius to romance,” ultimately reveals more about poetry than about politics. With Eva Brann, I hold that though political proto-theory can certainly be found in Homer’s poem, such political matters are not the ultimate substance revealed in and through the poem’s action. Instead, Homer’s *Odyssey*, and specifically the actions of the character whose name the poem bears, demonstrates that from the very beginning of the Western poetic tradition poetry has been concerned with indirectly articulating its own artistic power and manner of proceeding, and its fundamental connection to human modes of understanding. Readers of the *Odyssey* are led, like it or not, to the conclusion that a certain ineradicable *wildness*, a penchant for weaving facts and lies together into an indissoluble whole so as to convey an indirect meaning and to point to an ineffable truth, characterizes the art of poetry and, in a broader sense, human speech in general. Human speech can never *directly* tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, for, as the ancient Greeks knew, in contrast to the Persians (at least according to Herodotus), human speech is inherently unreliable and imperfect, and an art of reading (or listening) is necessary so that speech can be taken not only as literal statement but also as a likeness pointing to precisely those elements of human experience that resist direct articulation. The attentive reader of the *Odyssey* further discovers that if poetry is fundamentally the imitation of an action, as Aristotle suggests in the *Poetics*, and if in donning his various physical and

verbal disguises Odysseus is imitating the very act of imitation, then Odysseus's actions are in a certain sense imitating the poetic act!² Indeed, what Odysseus is most often *doing* in the *Odyssey* is using language to construct likenesses – the very activity of poetry understood in a broad sense. By so overtly figuring the figuring capacity of human beings, Odysseus reveals the fundamentally poetic nature of human action, something often taken for granted. In other words, Odysseus reveals that to act is always to *act* – both meanings of the English term coalesce, for rational animals possess the ability to imagine their actions as complete before they complete them, and thus in acting they are actually acting out a *likeness* of a previously imagined activity or role. If poetry involves the verbal construction of likenesses, then human action involves the acting out of likenesses. Or as George Burns once said, “The most important thing about acting is honesty; if you can fake that you’ve got it made” (Davis xviii).³

In examining several verbal disguises, or “poetic acts,” of Odysseus (and I mean “acts” in the double sense just discussed), it will be seen that his skillful lies in Ithaca simultaneously address utilitarian and ethical ends, and, not despite but because of their falsehoods (as will be seen, Odysseus's lies problematize the notion that true and false are mutually exclusive categories), point to the truth of Odysseus's actual odyssey (as told to, and completed with the help of, the Phaeacians). Additionally, Odysseus's poetic lies exhibit a surfeit of self-conscious exuberance that appears unavoidably to characterize successful human action and, for that matter, successful human poetry. In his “various wiles” and “fraudulent stories,” the “skillful devious-minded Lord Odysseus” (III.163) embodies and evokes the uninhibited pleasure associated with

² As Dennis Slattery writes: “It is as if Odysseus is a marvelously complex metaphor for poetry itself, with all of its ambiguities, uncertainties, intertwined plots, paradoxes and possible meanings” (24).

³ Michael Davis mentions this line in the process of himself discussing the connection between poetry and action, a connection that Davis claims is explicitly made in Aristotle's *Poetics*. See Davis's introduction in Aristotle's *On Poetics*, Tr. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2002.

discovering the poetic ground of human action, in other words, with discovering that human action fundamentally proceeds by imitation – something that can only be seen directly by looking at human action indirectly, as imitation. To be aware of action as inevitably imitation of action, and to “act” accordingly, is, as the *Odyssey* and the *Poetics* suggest, not only *the* fundamental means of moving the human soul but also a distinctly pleasurable experience. To use language to construct and understand likenesses, especially about the most important things – death, love, human community, the divine – is really great fun, something that professional thinkers and literary scholars often fail to admit. Indeed, a perhaps indirect aim of this essay is to suggest that literary critics are not so very different from Athene in the scene described above: they delight in the *metis* of poetic lies not only for its own sake but also because it allows free range for an acting out, a display, of their own wily, albeit underpaid, *metis*.⁴

As W. B. Sanford claims, “Homer was large-minded enough to comprehend a unity in apparent diversity, a structural consistency within an external changefulness, in the character of Ulysses” (80). One of the ways that the “structural consistency within an external changefulness” of Odysseus’s character manifests itself is in the consistent inconsistency with which for much of Homer’s poem the Son of Laertes is at one moment eminently practical and at the next moment exuberantly impractical. As a prototypical example, take Odysseus’s encounter with Polyphemos, one of the Cyclopes. Odysseus’s verbal dexterity – “Noman is my own name. Noman do they call me” (IX.366), he tells Polyphemos, who later, blinded, falls prey to the double entendre when he tells his neighbors, “Friends, Noman is murdering me by craft, not by force” (IX.408) – and unsurpassed innovation vis-à-vis disguise – Odysseus and his companions escape Polyphemos’s grasp by concealing themselves under the breasts of sheep – quite

⁴ For this latter point I am greatly indebted to pp. 72-73 of Louise H. Pratt’s *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar: Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

practically save his own life and the lives of his remaining companions. Nevertheless, Odysseus's "taunting speeches" (IX.474), yelled at the Cyclops as Odysseus and his companions sail away, seem the height of superfluous, ill-advised impracticality.⁵ By the time Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, though, the practicality of his wily lies and disguises, and the often impractical zest with which he carries out his williness seem to have moved closer together, becoming almost indistinguishable. Thus, in his encounter with Athene, an encounter that quite literally sets in motion the multifarious Cretan lies and disguises that Odysseus will employ in his return home and in his eventual defeat of the suitors, Odysseus weaves a web of fictional truths and truthful fictions that is at once eminently practical and also – as Athene's reaction attests – evidence of what Eva Brann calls Odysseus's "sheer exuberant mendaciousness" (238).

After being told by the shepherd that he is in fact in Ithaca, and after overtly stating what he needs from the shepherd – "But save these things and save me; I pray to you / As to a god" (XIII.230)⁶ – Odysseus launches into his first Cretan lie: "He did not speak the truth, but he held back his story, / Forever managing the very shrewd thought in his breast" (XIII.254-255). As Eva Brann points out, the various lies employed by Odysseus in Ithaca are appropriately described as "Cretan" not only because Odysseus adopts – falsely – a Cretan identity, but also because his lies contain facts about the true Odysseus that are precariously balanced between

⁵ It appears that Odysseus simply cannot abide the Cyclops only knowing him as "Noman," and thus he must yell and thereby lay claim *in his own name* to the defeat of the Cyclops. This desire of Odysseus to assert his own name appears in marked contrast to the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, in which Homer's poetic voice strikingly refrains from mentioning Odysseus by name. Instead, the poetic voice identifies Odysseus through the use of one of his common epithets: "Tell me, Muse, about the man of many turns, who many / Ways wandered when he had sacked Troy's citadel" (I.1-2). Perhaps the attempt further to embody his name, which connotes anger – both he who is angry and he who inspires anger in others – is a motive force for Odysseus throughout the poem.

⁶ Though it could perhaps be argued that by adding "[a]s to a god" Odysseus ironically reveals an implicit knowledge of his interlocutor's true, divine identity, it seems more likely that the poet Homer is here putting these words in Odysseus's mouth so as ironically to foreshadow what Odysseus will soon discover about this shepherd. For one thing, Odysseus's seemingly genuine testiness – "It is hard, goddess, for a mortal who meets you to recognize you, / Even one who is knowing. You liken yourself to anything" (XIII.312-313) – suggests that he truly did not recognize the shepherd as the goddess.

truth and falsehood.⁷ Odysseus's first lie relates the above-mentioned tall tale about having killed a son of the king of Crete because this son – specifically, Swift-footed Ortilochos – ““wanted to deprive me of all my booty / From Troy, for which I had suffered pains in my heart, / Passing through the wars of men and the troublesome waves, / And because I was not graciously willing to serve his father / In the Trojans' land, but led other men as companions”” (XIII.262-266). The first part of Odysseus's stated rationale for killing Ortilochos exemplifies Odysseus's lying tales at their most utilitarian: in directly telling the young shepherd that he killed Ortilochos because Ortilochos was after his loot, Odysseus indirectly warns the shepherd about just what kind of fate awaits him if he, too, should make an attempt to obtain some of Odysseus's booty. Not being absolutely certain at this point if the shepherd is a friend or a foe, Odysseus proceeds, in the indirect manner that his lie facilitates, both to feel out the shepherd and thus test the shepherd's potential either to help or to hurt him, and to warn the shepherd that he, Odysseus-disguised-as-a-Cretan, is a dangerous man. The second part of Odysseus's rationale, that he was not willing to be forced into the service of the Cretan king, conveys an overarching ethical stance against the notion of enforced servitude – a stance that will become all the more pronounced as Odysseus encounters the suitors, who have in effect put his entire estate in a position of servitude. Thus, the fiction of Odysseus's story carries a true representation of the ethical *telos* that has driven Odysseus homeward, namely, the desire to right the wrong that is being done against his household. Lastly, in relating that he arrived on the island of Ithaca via a Phoenician ship, and that he was placed on the island in a pseudo-somnambulistic state – alas, a

⁷ Brann writes: “Odysseus' kind of lying has something of the Cretan Liar's logical merry-go-round, which comes from his reflexiveness: He includes himself in his claim. Insofar as Odysseus includes himself among the Cretans, all these stories are lies because he is from Ithaca, but insofar as he (and no doubt many Cretans) did these things, the tales are true. They are facts really lived become lies in the telling – real facts falsely related” (237). Brann acknowledges that she does not know “whether the Cretans already had a reputation for lying and verbal trickery in the Homeric world,” but she imagines that “something of that sort was said about them and that Odysseus was assuming the right provenance when he set himself to lying his way into Ithaca” (237).

state that the “real” Odysseus all too often falls into – Odysseus conveys through his lie hints of his actual arrival in the Phaeacian ship. Because Athene is able to see Odysseus’s false story *as an imitation* – a *likeness* that reveals to the shepherd certain truths about Odysseus and his intent at the same time that it conceals Odysseus’s actual identity and tests out the shepherd’s own character and intent – she is able to recognize with a sense of familiar affection the true ever-wily Odysseus whom she knows and loves.

We will now turn to the Cretan lies that Odysseus, disguised as an old and wrinkled beggar, tells his faithful swineherd, Eumaeos. In his first Cretan confabulation, Odysseus proceeds to fashion perhaps his most dizzying fraudulent story of all – a story that calls into question the basic categories of true and false, fact and fiction, revealing the primacy of narrative (*epos*), of constructed tale telling, in both “true” and “false” stories. Eumaeos’s half-humorous skepticism – ““And you too, old man, would quickly fashion a story [*epos*] / If someone gave you a mantle and a tunic and clothes”” (XIV.131-132) – indeed accurately defines and apprehends the fundamental activity of narrative fashioning, of *poiesis*, in which Odysseus is engaged. As Eva Brann puts it, what Odysseus says to Eumaeos is “both fact and deceit, factual deceit” (239), for though the people and places in Odysseus’s tale may be factual, and though the events of the tale may themselves reflect, often through a kind of Freudianesque displacement, the true events of Odysseus’s adventures, the tale itself is patently false in a literal sense. Odysseus thus creates a kind of *mise en abime*, a hall of mirrors in which fact and fiction merge so as to reveal that even the most overt of fictions is rarely univocally made up of falsehoods. As Louise Pratt writes in connection with this quality of fiction:

Theorists of fiction have pointed out that audiences to fiction do not regard fiction as composed exclusively of the false, the invented, and the unreal as opposed to the true, the actual, and the real. We may, for example, believe that London is real, but that Sherlock

Holmes is not... we [can] appreciate the complexity of fiction's relationship to truth and falsity, its marriage of the real and the imaginary" (36-37).

Odysseus, of course, does not overtly tell this tall tale in order to demonstrate the full complexities of fictionality – even if this is one of the larger effects the tale has on thoughtful readers of Homer. Rather, as in the shepherd/Athene conversation, Odysseus has practical motives in mind. For one thing, he wants to obtain a sense of conversational trust with Eumaeos so that he can hear from a human source – as opposed to the divine Athene – the condition of his wife, son, and estate.⁸ He also, just as he tested the shepherd to determine “his” motivations, appears to be testing Eumaeos’s sense of loyalty and hospitality. An ethical dimension strongly pertains to this testing of Eumaeos, for in evaluating the all-important guest-host relationship Odysseus is in effect entering back into the ethical realities of Ithacan life and evaluating them. More than in the shepherd/Athene example, though, Odysseus seems to lose himself a bit in his wily maneuvers with Eumaeos, as if he becomes so caught up in his “role” as suffering-Cretan beggar, in other words, in the process of crafting a highly believable likeness of only semi-truthful events, that he does not limit himself merely to carrying it out so as to achieve his practical concerns. Here indeed the Odyssean surfeit of joy in acting and tale-telling manifests itself.

In Odysseus’s first tall tale told to Eumaeos, Idomeneus (making yet another appearance in an Odyssean fiction), Castor, Pheidon, Akastos, and Odysseus himself (yes, acting the fictional role of a Cretan, Odysseus inserts himself into his own tale!) are real, factual people; and the various locales described – Egypt, Phoenicia, Libya, etc. – could also not be any more real. As indicated, many of the fanciful events that Odysseus recounts also mirror true aspects of

⁸ Odysseus’s tendency to seek to corroborate, or occasionally supplement, divine guidance is one of his defining characteristics throughout the *Odyssey*. Though pious, the ever-resourceful Odysseus seems unable to avoid trying out all the available possibilities, investigating all the possible points of view.

his life and adventures. For example: Odysseus, playing the role of the Cretan beggar, tells Eumaeos, “I took a wife among men who had a large portion, / Because of my excellence, since I was not a good-for-nothing” (XIV.211-212), which mirrors the good marriage that Odysseus achieved in marrying Penelope; the brief one-month return that the “Cretan” claims he made to Crete before again setting out for adventures resembles the prophecy that has been made about the imminent departure that Odysseus will make after re-settling in Ithaca; the irresponsible behavior of the Cretan’s companions in Egypt resembles the behavior of Odysseus’s crew in the Ciconian and Laestrygonian adventures; King Pheidon’s stinginess in the Cretan’s tale is a direct reversal of the generosity of King Alcinoos in Odysseus’s experiences, and indeed the son of King Pheidon is a kind of male version of Nausicaa.⁹ And so on, for there are innumerable examples of this kind of mirror-like relation existing between Odysseus’s *epos*, told to Eumaeos, and his actual adventures, as told to the Phaeacians. In a broad sense, in discussing his fondness for travel and the sea, and his myriad sufferings, Odysseus manages through his “act” to do in truth the very thing that the fictional Cretan sets out to do within Odysseus’s fiction: tell “quite truthfully” the genuine “cares of [his] heart” (XVI.193; 197).

As Eva Brann, discussing this first tale that Odysseus spins to Eumaeos, writes: “It is comical that in this *mélange* of local allusions, gender transpositions, temporal scramblings, and plain fact, Eumaeos fails to believe the one thing which *is* the case, that Odysseus has returned, and he takes as true that which is a tissue of half-lies” (241). In true Cretan fashion, the tale provokes an odd sort of paradox: in actual fact, the much more fantastic, far-fetched events that Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about are true, while the much more believable, logical, matter-of-fact events that he tells Eumaeos about are false, and actually are largely derived from

⁹ See Brann (239-242) for a succinct summation of the resemblance between Odysseus’s adventures as recounted to Eumaeos and his adventures as recounted to the Phaeacians.

Odysseus's true, only ostensibly more fanciful adventures. In short, it is as if believability as a criterion for truth goes through a radical reversal: the more believable version of Odysseus's/the Cretan's adventures is false, the less believable version true.¹⁰ In creating such a paradox, Homer seems, through Odysseus, to be overtly destabilizing the distinction between truth and lies, fact and fiction, so as perhaps to emphasize that both true tales and false tales are first and foremost *tales*, likenesses constructed by means of language. Whether Odysseus is constructing a likeness of true, albeit incredible, events, as is the case when he addresses the Phaeacians; or whether he is constructing a likeness that borrows from true events, and even indirectly expresses them, while simultaneously communicating various practical messages – in both cases, the means of communication, namely, acting out (i.e., telling) likenesses, is the same.

The second lie that Odysseus tells Eumaeos – the swineherd's companions are also on hand for this one – is simultaneously the most obviously practical and one of the most delightfully inventive of all of Odysseus's lies. In addition, this most wily of Odyssean lies fully demonstrates both the inherent pleasure involved in crafting and recognizing verbal likenesses, and the fundamentally poetic quality of human action – two of the major themes of this essay. On one level, of course, the disguised Odysseus is with this second fraudulent tale “testing the swineherd out” (XIV.459) to see if he will lend him his mantle. As already stated, Odysseus seeks to evaluate Eumaeos's ability to behave appropriately in relation to a guest, and in a larger

¹⁰ Needless to say, not all scholars agree on this. Eva Brann argues that just the opposite is the case, in other words, that the real Odyssean lies occur in his stories to the Phaeacians, while his more believable account told to Eumaeos is in fact true (Brann 247-249). And others, like Dennis Slattery, hold that the Phaeacian stories are true in a symbolic, but not a literal, sense: “[The] poetic quality of Odysseus is most evident in Books 9-12 when he recounts his history, not without a few embellishments to thicken the fiction... Odysseus' autobiography is therefore a grand weaving of not what literally happened to him but, on a much deeper and mythical level, what he imagines what happened to him *means*” (Slattery 28, 38). I find Slattery's approach persuasive, though for the purpose of this essay I have decided to refrain from investigating the possible distinction between “mythical” and “literal” truth. Brann's claim I find compelling, but it ultimately seems that the internal consistency of Homer's poem would not hold up if indeed the adventures that Odysseus relates to the Phaeacians never literally happened. Plus, the tales that Odysseus tells in Ithaca seem much more likely to be lies, being that he is overtly in disguise and seeking to cover up his identity. In telling the Phaeacians about his adventures, Odysseus does not seem to have a compelling reason to confabulate – other than perhaps to better entertain his audience.

sense such testing may involve Odysseus reassuring himself that after all hospitality and proper behavior have not completely departed from Ithaca. Far from being purely a kind of theoretical exercise, however, Odysseus's story serves an eminently practical end as well: in the middle of a blustery night, the disguised Odysseus is undoubtedly quite genuinely cold, and a borrowed mantle would not be a bad thing at such a moment. Nevertheless, despite the apparent theoretical "testing" and practical motive behind this lie, Odysseus overtly suggests that his tale is told principally for the joy of telling it, which, because of the other comforts of the evening – food, drink, and companionship – seemingly cannot be resisted:

“Listen now, Eumaeos, and all you other companions,
I have a boast, and will tell a story, for crazing wine
Bids it, that sets even a man of many thoughts on
To sing and to laugh gently, and it drives him to dance,
And he brings out a story that would be better untold.” (XIV. 462-466)

Though such an opening gambit could be merely a rhetorical ploy to draw Eumaeos and his companions into the story so as better to test and persuade them, it seems likely that the disguised Odysseus is here, at the outset of a lie, at his most honest. For Odysseus, telling lies, in other words, crafting elaborate likenesses that work on multiple levels at once and pursue various ends, may well provide a kind of visceral pleasure right up there with food and drink.

Regardless, what follows is a kind of self-reflective and self-reflexive story in which the very trickery involved in the telling of the tale is directly embodied in the content of the tale itself: if within the tale the figure of Odysseus tricks Thoas into leaving his mantle behind for the freezing Cretan, in telling the tale the freezing Odysseus, who in Eumaeos's eyes is the same Cretan from within the story, in a sense "tricks" Eumaeos into giving him a mantle. On the surface, Odysseus's lie is a delightful tale that captures the true-to-life resourcefulness and trickery of

Odysseus; additionally, though, Odysseus's lie presents a poetic likeness of the precise kind of attentive, resourceful kindness and hospitality that Odysseus is hoping to provoke in Eumaeos.

Eumaeos undoubtedly approves of the anecdotal tale offered by his bedraggled Cretan guest, and the particular nature of his approval warrants attention:

“Old man, the story is excellent that you have told.
And no profitless word did you speak improperly.
So you shall not want for clothes or for anything else,
Of the things that befit a long suffering suppliant one meets.” (XIV. 508-511)

Strikingly, Eumaeos's response to the story does not center upon its realistic evocation of his beloved Odysseus's trickery, which seemingly would have convinced Eumaeos that the Cretan had truthfully encountered Odysseus; rather, Eumaeos's response ostensibly ignores the specific content of the story altogether and instead directly praises the beggar's *manner of telling* it – “no profitless word did you speak improperly.” As Louise Pratt claims, “It is not entirely clear whether Eumaeos believes Odysseus' story. His calling it an *ainos* may indicate his awareness of it as a fiction with a concealed message; this is what the word *ainos* means elsewhere in archaic poetry” (89). In rewarding the Cretan beggar for a story well-told – ““So you shall not want for clothes or for anything else”” – it may be that Eumaeos is also responding to, and indeed imitating, the particular *likeness* that the tale has presented to his imagination. In marked contrast to the suitor Antinoos, who utterly fails to see in the beggar's/Odysseus's tale of a painful reversal of fortune a likeness to his own impending fate (see XVII.419-453), Eumaeos possesses the kind of perspicacious double vision that can apprehend the events of a tale as simultaneously presenting an imitation of an action, a likeness best expressed indirectly. In this case, the action imitated, the likeness presented, is the very steadfastly resourceful hospitality that Eumaeos will now in turn *himself* imitate in his actions. If Eumaeos had only understood the beggar's story literally, not as a poetic *ainos*, he would have simply rejoiced at the knowledge

that this lowly beggar really did know Odysseus, a fact that would bolster the beggar's assertion that Odysseus is undoubtedly still alive and soon to return to Ithaca. Instead, though, Eumaeos praises the beggar's ability to tell a story, which now can perhaps be understood as a way of praising his ability to construct a likeness, an imitation of an action, in and through his story. In giving the beggar a mantle and affirming his own hospitality, Eumaeos in effect *acts out* the very likeness, the particular style of behavior, which he understood by means of the beggar's story. In Odysseus's story and Eumaeos's response to it, poetry and action merge: Odysseus's lie, his fictional tale, is fundamentally the verbal construction of an imitation of an action, and thus is poetry; Eumaeos's response to this tale is fundamentally a form of acting, a self-aware imitation of an action previously imagined, and thus is also poetry. Both poetic acts – one spoken, one manifested in imitative human action – are in and of themselves pleasurable activities, and are also mediums in and through which to negotiate the most pressing and practical of concerns.

The several Odyssean lies discussed in the preceding pages – Odysseus's first Ithacan confabulation delivered to the ever-appreciative Athene, and his two fictional tales spun out to the swineherd Eumaeos – have been shown to be not mere falsehoods but elaborate poetic constructions. Odysseus's lies are poetic acts that express practical and ethical concerns while simultaneously conveying the truth of Odysseus's character and his many sufferings – a character, and sufferings, that for obvious reasons cannot be *directly* revealed if Odysseus is successfully to carry out his reemergence in Ithaca. In addition, Odysseus's poetic lies skillfully weave together truths and falsehoods, and in so doing emphasize the inherently constructed, poetic nature of human speech, which after all can only proceed – whether dealing with true events or with the most unreal fancies – by means of verbal likenesses. Lastly, Odysseus's lies – verbal disguises plied in the context of literal physical disguises, literal acts of deceit – suggest

that human action is fundamentally imitative or poetic in that to act is always to adopt a particular pose, a particular “act” that fits the moment. And with that, this particular scholarly “act” is brought to a close.

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