

Cognition and affect in oral narration

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ON HIS WAY home from Troy after the conclusion of the Trojan War, Odysseus came to the land of the Phaiakians, whose help he sought in reaching Ithaka. In honor of his guest, King Alkinoos invited noblemen to a feast in his palace, and after dining the king proposed that the company go outdoors where he wished to host a number of sporting events. In the course of the games Odysseus declined an invitation by one of the young nobles to join in the competition, as a result of which another youth, Euryalos, declared rudely that the guest was no athlete. Angered, Odysseus grabbed a discus and outthrew the local athletes. At this tense moment the king hastily changed plans, bringing the sporting events to a close and proposing that there be a performance of dance and song for the stranger, whereupon the bard Demodokos sang of the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, telling, while dancers danced to the bard's song, how the cuckolded husband Hephaistos learned of the affair and embarrassed the lovers publicly.¹ Odysseus and the Phaiakians were delighted by the song. Finally, the king bade the youth who had offended the stranger make amends with an apology and a gift, which he did.

An oral storytelling event such as this one presupposes several conditions, whether the narrative itself is a myth, legend, folktale, or some other sort of story. First, it presupposes a social occasion, a company of at least two persons, as here we have a gathering of Phaiakian men and their as yet anonymous guest Odysseus. Second, it presupposes conditions that are congenial to narration as an activity, as here the guests are assembled outdoors to be entertained. Third, it presupposes a narrative repertory. Someone must know a story, as does the singer Demodokos, who is able to draw upon a prior acquaintance with the myth of Ares and Aphrodite. So far so good. But what is it in the present situation that moves the Phaiakian bard to sing precisely the song of Ares and Aphrodite and no other? And what does the song, or its underlying story, mean to the participants in this event?

¹ The song appears in Hom. *Od.* 8.266-366.

Broadly speaking, Homeric bards seem to know two kinds of song. One kind is ostensibly historical, set in heroic times such as that of the Trojan War. It is serious in theme, and its meter is hexameter. Nearly all the songs that the oral poets in the *Odyssey* sing are of this kind, as is the *Odyssey* itself. Another kind of song is mythical. It is lighter in theme, its meter is probably lyric, and it is coupled with performative dancing, which may mean that it is mimed.² The song of Ares and Aphrodite, accompanied by dancers, belongs to this genre. When, therefore, King Alkinoos orders a bard as well as dancers to perform, he is implicitly ordering a light song rather than a heavy one.

Consider a parallel from the Classical period. In his *Symposium* Xenophon portrays an eating and drinking party for men that concludes with a mime performed by dancers to the music of a flute. There is no longer a bard to give the story; instead, the dancing-master gives a synopsis of the events, which the dancers act out. The story in this case is the love of Dionysos and Ariadne, which is mimed by a young girl and a youth. The guests admire the performance, which brings their evening to a pleasant conclusion, creating in them feelings of love, unity, and desire.³ Structurally, Xenophon's post-prandial dance with flute in Classical Athens is a successor to the post-prandial dance with stringed instrument that Homer describes for the Heroic Age.⁴ Among the topics that are appropriate for this kind of entertainment are the loves of the gods—the love of Ares and Aphrodite in Homer, the love of Dionysos and Ariadne in Xenophon.

With regard to the bawdiness of Demodokos' song, the crucial social variable is that Alkinoos' party is exclusively male.⁵ The host and his guests are male, the

2 On the lyric meter of Demodokos' original see Thalmann 1984:118; whether the dancers mime the story or not is an old and perhaps unanswerable question. Songs accompanied by dancing included themes other than erotic myths. In an illustration on the shield of Achilles boys and girls dance together and sing the Linos Song, evidently a kind of mythical dirge, to the music of a young phorminx-player (Hom. *Il.* 18.567-72).

3 Xen. *Symp.* 9.

4 On the variety of entertainment at symposia, or post-prandial drinking-parties, at different periods see Pellizer 1990, Fehr 1990, Slater 1990, and Jones 1991. In Greek literature the best-known instance of spontaneous entertainment intended to head off strife at a gathering is probably Hephaistos' comically assuming the role of cup-bearer for the other Olympians, perhaps in parody of Ganymedes, in the first book of the *Iliad* (584-600), a strategy that has often been compared with Demodokos' singing of the Song of Ares and Aphrodite in the eighth book of the *Odyssey* (e.g. Burkert 1960), both Olympian scenes culminating in divine laughter. For other instances in ancient literature of therapeutic joking or singing in touchy sympotic situations see Slater (1990:216). Notice also Eumolpus' recounting the erotic and comic novella of the Widow of Ephesus to a company of persons aboard ship who recently were fighting (Petron. *Sat.* 109-13).

5 The maleness of the party has been noted by several scholars, e.g., Austin (1975:160) and Peradotto (1990:56f. note 14). Whether Homer's own audience for this singing of the *Odyssey* was male or mixed is a question that cannot be answered. See in general Segal (1992).

athletes are male, the dancers are male, the singer is male. Even the climactic event within the song of Ares and Aphrodite features a male audience, for the minstrel says that when Hephaistos summoned the gods to witness the trapped adulterers, male deities came to the house whereas all the goddesses stayed away. A husband's coming upon his wife *in flagrante delicto* was not a proper subject for decent females to show an interest in among either Phaiakians or Olympians. The absence of females at this point in the Phaiakian party enables a ribald tale of adultery and revenge to be told and openly enjoyed by the men. It is a male story, and an important aim of its performance on the present occasion is to reconcile the hot-headed males with one another.

The song itself tells how (1) Hephaistos was cuckolded by Ares but (2) triumphed in the end when he exposed the trapped lovers to public view, after which (3) Poseidon negotiated a formal settlement between Hephaistos and Ares. The story thus offers an erotic parallel to the sporting events in Phaiakia, in which (1) Odysseus was insulted by Euryalos for being no athlete, after which (2) Odysseus enjoyed a public triumph when he entered the contest and outthrew the other discus-throwers, whereupon (3) Alkinoos imposed a settlement, instructing Euryalos to bestow upon the stranger a gift of reconciliation.⁶ Since Demodokos' song celebrates the public triumph of a man who has been wronged, we must suppose that the Phaiakian bard selects it on the present occasion for this reason. The choice of the affair of Ares and Aphrodite as the subject of Demodokos' song also entails narrative strategies that extend beyond the immediate performance situation, for the events of the myth resonate equally with the erotic insult that in the distant past precipitated the Trojan War itself, the affair of Paris and Helen, which led the wronged husband Menelaos to take revenge upon the offender, and the song also calls to mind the contemporary erotic situation on Ithaka, where in Odysseus' absence arrogant suitors visit his house daily, pressing his wife Penelope to choose one of them, suitors who will all perish one day by the hand of Odysseus. So the reasons why Demodokos performs specifically the song of Ares and Aphrodite on this occasion have to do, on the one hand, with social motives answering to the immediate situation that we can impute to the host Alkinoos and to the internal narrator Demodokos and, on the other hand, with artistic motives attributable to Homer that include resonances between the present myth and its immediate episode and also between the present myth and the larger legend of Troy.

Before I turn to the question of what meanings the story has for participants in the event, I wish to consider another story recounted to Odysseus, that of the Sailor and the Oar.

6 The relationship of the song of Ares and Aphrodite to its immediate context is discussed by Edinger (1980) and Braswell (1982).

In the Homeric version of this international narrative, Odysseus is told to put an oar on his shoulder and walk inland in search of a community that knows nothing of the sea or seafaring. When eventually he encounters a man who mistakes the oar for a winnowing shovel (that is, who mistakes a basic marine tool for a morphologically similar agricultural tool), Odysseus will know that he has found a community whose inhabitants are completely ignorant of the sea.⁷ From Homer we learn nothing at all about the telling of the Sailor and the Oar as a story, for he frames it, not as a narrative as such, but as instructions given by the seer Teiresias to the hero Odysseus. Since Homer manifestly wishes to include a mention of this adventure in his poem but since the actual quest of Odysseus and the oar takes place after the events recounted in the *Odyssey*, the poet is obliged to foretell it, which he does here by putting it into the mouth of a seer.

We can however compensate for our lack of information concerning the oral transmission of this story in antiquity by turning to the evidence of modern tradition, for the story of the Sailor and the Oar continues to circulate among seamen in modern times.⁸ Here, for example, is a Greek text published a half-century ago in which the story is recounted as a legend about St. Elias, that is, the Old Testament prophet Elijah.

1. They say about St. Elias that he was a seaman and served all his life as a captain on ships. He experienced great storms, and in one frightful storm his ship sank and all except for him were drowned. Getting hold then of the oar of a boat, St. Elias managed to reach the mainland. Disgusted however with his sufferings at sea, he withdrew far inland. With his oar on his shoulder he began going forward, and whomever he met on the road he asked, 'What is this?' And whenever they said, 'An oar,' he understood that these people knew of the sea. And he kept moving on in order to go further inland. In this manner one day he reached a little village built on the top of a mountain. He gathered the villagers, showed them the oar, and asked them, 'What is this?' With one voice they all answered, 'A piece of wood.' These people had never seen the sea, ships, and boats. For this reason he remained with them forever. And from that time the chapels of St. Elias have always been built on mountain tops.⁹

The contemporary story of the Sailor and the Oar also circulates as a secular folktale. I collected the following text in the United States some twenty-five years ago from an informant who had heard it while serving in the United States Navy.

7 Hom. *Od.* 11.121-37, 23.265-87.

8 See Hansen (1977, 1990).

9 Ταμσσίας 1951:129, No. 3.

2. The story, as I remember it, goes roughly like this, that there was an old sailor in the United States Navy—presumably, since the story took place on the east coast of the U.S. He put in his thirty years, and took his retirement option, and set out walking down the gangplank with a gunny-sack over one shoulder and carrying an oar over the other shoulder, and headed due west inland, and walked somewhere through New Jersey or so, and happened to pass someone standing along the road who waved to him and said, ‘Where’re you going with that oar over your shoulder?’ And he just nodded, and barely looked at the person who greeted him in this fashion, and marched on heading westward, and traveled further and further inland. At some point in the middle of, say, Ohio or Indiana, he passed someone else alongside the road who waved at him, greeted him, and yelled as he passed by, ‘Hey, where’re you going with that rower over your shoulder?’ And he just sort of barely met eyes with the person who greeted him in this fashion, and kept on walking.

And sometime further along the way, perhaps around Nebraska somewhere, he passed someone along the side of the road who said to him something to the effect of, ‘Hey, mister, what on earth are you carrying that piece of lumber over your shoulder for?’ And a grin slowly broke across his face, and he stamped his foot and said, ‘This is where I’m settling down.’ And that’s the end of the story.¹⁰

In modern oral tradition the story of the Sailor and the Oar is known in two redactions, a longer one and a shorter one. The two preceding texts illustrate the story in its longer form. In its shorter form tellers present the tale somewhat comically as a future event. The following narration was recorded by folklorist George Carey from a seaman on the northeastern coast of the United States.

3. I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve worked on the water and I’m getting kind of sick of it all. When I retire I’m gonna go and go until somebody asks me what that is I’ve got in my hand. Then I’ll say, ‘You don’t know what an oar is?’ And if he says, ‘No,’ I’m gonna throw my oars away and let that row-boat go with the tide, and then I’m gonna spend the rest of my life right there.¹¹

In the short form, then, the sailor’s quest is represented as something that the narrator claims he himself will do.

10 Taped interview with Mr. Adam Horvath (July 5, 1975).

11 Carey 1971:111.

Why do narrators tell this story? What triggers its telling? What can the situational contexts of transmission reveal about the meaning of the story for its users? Let us consider several narrations in their living environments.

The following text was published in 1906 by the classical scholar W.H.D. Rouse, who reproduces a conversation that he had aboard a Greek caique one evening with its aged skipper, Hajji Giorgis, as they passed the time sailing from Kos to Astypalaia.

4. 'Ah well,' says Giorgis, 'tis a poor trade this, as the holy Elias found.' 'What was that?' I asked. 'The prophet Elias,' quoth he, 'was a fisherman; he had bad weather, terrific storms, so that he became afraid of the sea. Well, so he left his nets and his boat on the shore, and put an oar over his shoulder, and took to the hills. On the way, who should he see but a man. "A good hour to you," says he. "Welcome," says the man. "What's this, can you tell me?" says St Elias. "That?" says the man, "Why that's an oar." Eh, on he goes till he meets another man. "A good hour to you," says St Elias. "You are welcome," says the man. "What's this?" says St Elias. "Why, that's an oar, to be sure," says the man. On he goes again, until he comes to the very top of the mountain, and there he sees another man. "Can you tell me what this is?" asks St Elias. "That?" says the man, "Why, that's a stick." "Good!" says St Elias, "this is the place for me, here I abide." He plants the oar in the ground, and that is why his chapels are all built on the hill tops.' 'Well, well, I didn't know the prophet Elias followed the sea; of course the holy apostles did, we all know that.' 'Aye, and so they did. You know why they left it, sir, don't you?' 'Why?' 'Well, you see, Christ and the Apostles....'¹²

Kapetan Giorgis begins by making an evaluative comment upon seafaring as a profession and then, prompted by his interlocutor, recounts the legend of St. Elias by way of explanation or illustration of his initial remark.

Like the foregoing, the following text is a classical scholar's description of an unexpected encounter with a narration of the Sailor and the Oar, this time in its shorter form. The scholar is the late Cedric Whitman of Harvard University.

5. The old seaman of my story was a U.S. sailor who sat next to me on a train going to New York many years ago. He was reading a comic book and I was reading *Paradise Lost*. Presently he began to read over my shoulder, then nudged me and asked: 'Hey, you like dat stuff?' I said I did, and a conversation began. I asked how long he had been in the Navy, and he said something like twenty-five years. I remarked that he must have liked it to have stayed in it so long. His answer was: 'Look, when I get out of dis Navy,

¹² Rouse 1906:414.

I'm gonna put an oar on my shoulder and walk inland; and when somebody says, "Where d'ya find a shovel like dat?" dat's where I'm gonna build my house.' He made no mention of a sacrifice to Poseidon; he was shamelessly secular about it all, but clearly the inland journey spelled release from, and forgetfulness of, the hardships of the sea, peace at last. I didn't ask him if he'd read the *Odyssey*, but I doubt it; he had not read *Paradise Lost*. He seemed, in fact, pretty nearly illiterate—perhaps a bard? Anyway, that's all I remember, except that the experience gave me a pleasantly creepy feeling that I was talking to One Who Was More Than He Seemed.¹³

As in Rouse's account, the topic that triggers the storytelling is an evaluation of seafaring as a profession.

In the next text the topic of conversation similarly focuses upon what a sailor intends to do upon his discharge from the navy. The informant is a professor of anthropology at a Canadian university.

6. Although I have long been a Canadian citizen, I was born and raised in the United States, and was a U.S. Navy flier in World War II. Just about this time of year in 1945, I was standing in a queue in Providence, Rhode Island, waiting for a bus to Naval Air Station Quonset Point, where I was then stationed. Most of the people in line were non-commissioned personnel; I had the rank of Lt., USNR

The Japanese had surrendered, and the war was over. Ahead of me in the line, several enlisted men were talking about what they were going to do after their discharge from the Navy. One chap expansively declared, in Appalachian accents: 'I'm going to get me a binnacle light off some junked-up boat or ship—they're lots around—and I'm going to take and carry that son of a bitch straight in away from the god-damned ocean. I'll show it to people and when I get to where they say, "What is that funny-looking flashlight?" I'll just stop right there. I'll know I've got to where they don't know nothing about ships or the sea.' This is from memory, but I think I have it fairly as given.

When I say that I had graduated college with a degree in Classics shortly before the War, you can understand the thrill with which I heard these words.¹⁴

Last of all, I print an excerpt from a letter that appeared in England in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1919.

13 Personal letter from the late Cedric Whitman, Professor of Classics, Harvard University (October 13, 1975).

14 Personal letter from Richard Slobodin, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, McMaster University (October 11, 1977).

7. A naval officer tells me that the boatswain of his ship, in speaking of his future retirement, said that he should walk inland with an oar on his shoulder, and when he met with people who asked him what he was carrying should settle there.

This naturally reminded me of the passage in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* where Odysseus is told to go inland till he comes to a people which has no knowledge of ships and the sea. The sign of his reaching his destination is to be that a wayfarer meeting him will ask if he is carrying a winnowing shovel on his shoulder. I was also told that the saying was not uncommon with sailors, but I have not had further confirmation of this.¹⁵

In all these conversations we encounter a social occasion of one sort or another that is congenial to conversational narration: men passing time aboard ship, men passing time on a train, men standing in line, and so on. In each instance, the narrative repertory of one of the interlocutors includes the story of the Sailor and the Oar. One or another stimulus provokes the narrative to leap from psychic storage to active transmission.

What is it that triggers its telling? Each conversationalist recounts the Sailor and the Oar when an opportunity arises to comment upon seafaring as a profession, to evaluate it as a way of life. An ambivalent attitude toward the sea as giver of both livelihood and distress has doubtless been a feature of the mariner's experience from the time of the earliest seafaring to the present day, and the Sailor and the Oar expresses in a simple fashion the negative extreme of this attitude, by describing a disgusted sailor who acts out the mariner's fantasy of quitting the sea for good, or who declares he will do so. It recounts in narrative form the fantasy that every mariner must sometimes have, the desire simply to walk away from the sea.

The telling of an oral story is always a willful act, and the circumstances that trigger its narration necessarily reveal something of the significance that it has for its narrator as well as something of the significance that the narrator expects it to have for his or her hearers.¹⁶ Just what is communicated by these stories—the Sailor and the Oar, Ares and Aphrodite—on the occasions when we are privy to their transmission, historical or fictive? What do the narratives actually mean when they are employed in the natural environment of oral storytelling?

In each instance there is found a significant parallelism between narrative and situation, either the situation of the narrator or that of his audience. The narrator

15 J.E. King, letter in *Times Literary Supplement* (September 11, 1919) 485.

16 Concerning how narrators use traditional stories to make a point, see Hansen (1982) and Edmunds (1997).

of the Sailor and the Oar comments upon himself, while the narrator of Ares and Aphrodite comments upon members of his audience. The message is an indirect one, taking the form of an extended metaphor, so that a conscious or unconscious act of reasoning on the part of both narrator and audience is required in order to construe the analogy. Each narrator selects from his repertory a story that makes an appropriately logical and intentional fit with the moment, and in order to appreciate the communication fully an audience member must perceive the fit and draw the appropriate inference.

Nevertheless the messages themselves are not essentially intellectual in content, for the stories do not really express a general truth about life, nor do they illuminate something about the world or about society that might be deemed puzzling. On the contrary, to judge from the contextual evidence of the narrations of the Sailor and the Oar (Texts 4-7), the significance of this story for its narrators is essentially *affective*. It captures a feeling, a sentiment, packaged artfully in the form of a brief but memorable narrative. The sailor who walks inland with an oar on his shoulder is a metaphor for every sailor who has ever dreamed of quitting the sea, and beyond that, since obviously the story can be meaningful to non-mariners as well, it is a metaphor for everyone who has ever wished simply to walk away from his or her present life or from anything whatsoever. The sailor in the story acts out his feeling, and since the present narrators tell the story about themselves, they do so in part in order to communicate to other persons how they *feel* about their work. 'Ah well,' says Giorgis, 'tis a poor trade this, as the holy Elias found.'

Narrative communication is much the same among the Phaiakians. When developments in King Alkinoos' party induce him to change the entertainment for his guests from sports to song, he indicates by his choice of singer and dancers his wish for a light story to lift the heavy mood of his guests, and the bard accordingly selects from his repertory an erotic myth, a bawdy novella suited to promote male bonding. More specifically he chooses a tale of personal triumph over insult that might be understood to chide the offender in an inoffensive fashion and to give heart to the offended stranger, a story moreover of eventual reconciliation that hints at the desirability of intervention by kindly authority. Through his bard the king offers his guests a gift of art and pleasure, its ribaldry reminding the assembled company of the hearty fellowship of males and its story graciously communicating to the stranger the ultimate goodwill of his hosts. The competent interpreter must do the logical work of construing the metaphors, but as in the case of the story of the Sailor and the Oar the message itself is *affective*.

The contemporary Greek legend of St. Elias and the Oar, like the ancient legend of Odysseus and the Oar, can conclude with an aetiological coda.¹⁷ When it does

17 On the aetiological function of the legend of Odysseus and the Oar, see Hansen 1990:256f.

so (Texts 1 and 4), it provides a historical *aition* for a feature of Elias' cult, the customary location of the saint's chapels on heights. Although no published text known to me illustrates a narrator's telling the Elias legend in the course of a conversation about the saint's chapels, I myself encountered an instance. In the 1980's I lived in a suburb of Athens near a mountain upon the side of which a chapel of St. Elias was built; when one day I pointed out the chapel to two Athenian intellectuals, they responded by recounting to me the legend of Elias and the Oar. So at least two different topics are known to trigger a telling of the Elias legend, seafaring as a profession or the location of Elias' chapels. A narrator might thereupon comment metaphorically upon himself and his profession, the message being essentially affective, or he might comment upon Elias' chapels and monasteries, the message being essentially intellectual, providing as it does an allegedly historical reason for a puzzling pattern of Greek cult. In short, depending upon the situation the same story might serve either a primarily affective or a primarily intellectual purpose.

Now consider this passage in which the scholar Christodoulos Syrmakesis in his study of St. Elias in Greek tradition cites the legend of Elias and the Oar.

8. The folk, wishing to explain why on almost all mountain tops a chapel is built in the name of St. Elias, narrate different legends. Out of many we report an unpublished Paxian legend reported by Dim. Loukatos from the narration of D. Kontaris.

'Are we going fishing?'

'Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to do like St. Elias did. I'm going to put my oars on my shoulder.'

'St. Elias was a seaman and got so tired of the seaman's life—that time they did not have engines and sails but only an oar—that he put his oars on his shoulder and said, "I'm not coming back to the sea." And he went to the highest mountain. For which reason, all the churches of the prophet Elias that exist are also on mountains. (I don't remember the conversation with the villagers).'¹⁸

This is a revealing passage, not because fisherman Kontaris could not recall a few details of the story he was relating to folklorist Loukatos, but because the fisherman says that he is ready, like St. Elias before him, to give up his trade for good, whereas scholar Syrmakesis cites this conversation in illustration of his assertion that the Greek folk recount various legends to explain why on nearly every Greek mountaintop there is found a chapel of St. Elias. The learned Syrmakesis fails to hear fisherman Kontaris behind the printed text, or he simply overrides the

18 Συρμακέσης 1964:60.

fisherman's implication about the weariness of his work, his express readiness to walk away from fishing forever. Syrmakesis' educated mind assigns every importance to the aetiological coda and none to the expressive element of the mariner's fantasy. Like most scholars, Syrmakesis over-emphasizes the intellectual aspect of myths and legends at the expense of the affective.

It is impossible to judge the relative importance of affect and aetiology in the Greek tradition of Elias and the Oar as a whole, let alone the ancient tradition of Odysseus and the Oar, because of the lack of contextual data. Only two published texts of the Elias legend featuring information about the situational context of narration are known to me: classicist Rouse's shipboard conversation with Kapetan Giorgis and folklorist Loukatos' conversation with fisherman Kontaris. Nevertheless, in both of these tellings the narrator's motivation for relating the legend is to make a point about the misery of his profession, not to explain the location of the saint's chapels. If these instances of transmission are characteristic of Greek tradition, the impulse that typically motivates a narrator's telling the Elias story is his wish to make an artful and symbolic communication about affect, to convey something of his feelings toward his profession, and not a wish to offer colorful information about a feature of the landscape. When it is present, the *aition* is, to be sure, part of the pleasure of the legend, lending it closure and tying it in with the external world, which in turn appears to confirm the truth of the legend. But the secondary importance of the *aition* in the Elias legend is confirmed by the fact that most branches of the tradition of the Sailor and the Oar, including all anglophone forms of the story, lack the aetiological element entirely. The story of the Sailor and the Oar can be told without an aetiological coda, but it cannot be told without a protagonist who has strong feelings toward the sea.¹⁹

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