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Conversation in the *Odyssey*

Scott Richardson

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The epigrammatic saying that speech has been given to us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts came into his mind. (Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*)

When it occurs to Nausicaa that she had better do laundry in preparation for her own wedding day, which will surely come soon, she delays her father's workday with a request for the proper equipment, explaining, with a façade of ingenuity that might have fooled anyone else that she must look out for her family's hygiene:

“It is proper for you yourself to plan plans

with the chiefs wearing clean clothes on your skin.

But you have five sons in your house, two married, but three red-blooded bachelors;

they always want to go to dances wearing

freshly cleaned clothes; I have to think about all these things.” (*Odyssey* 6.60–65)¹

Alcinous has no trouble decoding his daughter’s appeal and grants it without betraying his understanding of her true intention:

Thus she spoke, for she was ashamed to name her youthful marriage to her dear father. And he understood everything and replied:

“I do not begrudge you mules, child, nor anything else.

Go! The slaves will prepare for you a wagon

lofty and well-wheeled, fitted with a wagon cover.” (*Odyssey* 6.66–70)

We have just heard a conversation in which the communication takes place beneath the surface of the words: what is spoken by both parties is not what is truly conveyed by Nausicaa nor meant by Alcinous. This indirect interchange is a paradigm of the distinctive mode of conversation in the *Odyssey*.

I like to think of language as a medium for the clear disclosure of what people want to get across. In conversation, words transmit information, requests, and the thoughts of my interlocutor. It is a straightforward process: say what you mean, use language to convey what you are thinking, and then I will understand. But I can see the author of the *Odyssey* rolling his eyes in disgust at my banal literalness and naively unimaginative attitude toward language. In this poet’s hands language tends toward obfuscation rather than illumination. His characters do not as a rule say what they mean, and conversation in his epic is something of a game at which some people are better players than others. Playing the game properly requires a keen ability to use words to convey meaning indirectly and a sensitive awareness of what has been said despite what has been said. The first speaker in this Henry James dialogue does not stand a chance in the world of the *Odyssey*:

“Why is it so necessary for you to go to the theatre tonight, if Miss Rooth doesn’t want you to?”

“My dear child, she does. But that has nothing to do with it.”

“Why then did she say that she doesn’t?”

“Oh, because she meant just the contrary.”

“Is she so false then—is she so vulgar?”

“She speaks a special language; practically it isn’t false, because it renders her thought, and those who know her understand it.” (James 1948, 437)

Likewise, conversation in the *Odyssey* is a cryptic puzzle, intelligible and rewarding to those who know how to solve it, baffling to those who take it at face value.

Homer's attitude toward language extends to a generally suspicious view of the way the world works.² Dialogue in the *Odyssey* is founded on indirection, and the characters' success in life, even their survival, owes a great deal to both using and recognizing speech as a means of disguising thoughts and intent. This view of language as smoke and mirrors not only comments on the nature of human communication³ but also supports a worldview at the heart of the *Odyssey* as a whole, one characterized by distrust and uncertainty.

Apart from instructions, gestures of hospitality, laments, prayers, and requests (and even some of these are not only what they appear), the bulk of dialogue that is straightforward and honest comes from the mouths of characters who prove in other ways artless: Zeus, Nestor, the servants, the suitors other than Eurymachus, Telemachus early on, and Alcinous most of the time. Zeus and Nestor, the divine and human voices of social and narrative order, stand above the game; the others either do not realize there even is such a game or have not yet learned to play it very well. The great majority of conversations in the *Odyssey*,⁴ however, feature one or more of these techniques: indirect address, implication, hidden or coded meaning, lying, feigned ignorance, injunction to secrecy, concealment of facts, expressions of disbelief, evasion, disguised sentiments, testing, indirect steering or goading, presentation of false reasons, or performances in character.

Odysseus, of course, an eminently suspicious man, is the champion of all these kinds of indirection and concealment, the consummate manipulator of language to suit his advantage. It might be instructive, however, to return first to our apprentice conversationalist, who shows promise but has not yet reached the finesse that gives Odysseus his edge. Nausicaa has the proper Odyssean instinct when she manipulates her father into giving her mules and a wagon, but it seems to escape her notice that Alcinous has seen through her coded request. She also fails to acknowledge that she did not come up with the laundry idea on her own. Athena, who wants a warm reception for her hero, cold-bloodedly misleads her with the cock-and-bull expectation of an impending marriage (6.25-40), and the girl innocently takes Athena's words at face value and pays for it in subsequent disappointment. Unaware of the divine machinations and relishing her apparent success at concealing her meaning and still getting her way, she goes on to ply her novice talent on the master deceiver by the stream. After Odysseus delivers a masterful speech in which his hints and flattery impart all the characteristics of a potential husband without disclosing his identity or his true intentions toward her, Nausicaa offers herself to him with what she thinks to be a cleverly disguised proposition through indirection. She worries that if they are seen together, people will talk:

“And then some worthless fellow would meet us and say,
 ‘Who is this tall and handsome stranger walking with
 Nausicaa? Where did she find him? He’s going to be her husband.’”
 (*Odyssey* 6.275-77)

A great part of the girl’s adolescent charm is her delight in participating in conversational indirection without recognizing its transparency in her hands and without realizing that others are engaged in the same gambit with her. Her obviousness highlights by contrast the techniques of the *Odyssey*’s seasoned conversationalists, and her natural impulse to speak obliquely suggests that an attitude toward language as a power to use judiciously and to one’s advantage is innate to the characters in the world of the *Odyssey*.

Though some years her senior, Telemachus is only now beginning to fathom the game of language, which for him, as for his father, can mean survival. The ability to conceal, lie, and feign innocence with words is a hallmark of Telemachus’s education in the *Odyssey*.⁵ By the end he is still rather immature in this respect but a far cry from the blunt-speaking youth we see at the beginning. After Athena’s visit rouses him from inaction, he asserts himself before the suitors in no uncertain terms, calling them insolent, claiming dominion over his father’s house, telling them that he will order them out at the assembly he himself will call the next day, calling on Zeus to destroy them, and claiming dominion over his father’s house (1.367-80, 389-98). A bit of Athena, goddess of deception, does cling to him, however, after she leaves: when asked about his mysterious visitor, Telemachus dissembles and gives Athena’s prepared legend, though he now realizes, as Homer tells us, that his guest was a deity (417-20). His virgin address to the assembly in Book 2 brings him back to the fumbling stage of the concealment game: he announces forthrightly his disgust with the suitors (50-58, 63-67), his wish that they would leave his household alone and even that they would be slaughtered (58-62, 68-79, 138-45), his intention to leave Ithaca in search of news of his father (212-17), and his plans thereafter (218-23)—no subtlety here, nothing but straightforward communication to his mortal enemies of his thought and intent.

By the time he returns home, however, he has learned the value of telling less than he knows and saying something other than what he means. An ally of his new-found father, Telemachus can now tell bald-faced lies even to his mother, give no sign that the new beggar is anyone special, and play his role in Odysseus’s subterfuge convincingly. He has learned the way of the world, and the survival of father and son depends on this particular education. He can give his father a knowing glance and remain silent when Eumaeus worries about the suitors’ violence (16.476-77). He holds his tongue when first an object is thrown at his father (17.489-91) and speaks cunningly at the sec-

ond throw (18.406-09). Nevertheless, he is still a beginner. He cannot control his temper after the third assault but lashes out with a torrent of heartfelt abuse first toward the culprit and then toward the suitors as a whole (20.304-19).⁶ A more telling sign of immaturity comes in the recognition scene between Odysseus and Penelope, when the boy reverts to his naive view of language and scolds his mother for not believing the simple truth that has been uttered clearly in plain Greek, that the man before her is her husband (23.97-103). Her reply shows her to be one of the elite:

“If truly indeed

this is Odysseus and he has come home, we two would
certainly know each other best of all; for there are between us
signs which we know, hidden from everyone else.” (*Odyssey* 23.107-10)

Of course, the true addressee of this retort is not her son at all but the man she is about to test with the fiendishly clever bed trick, and the indirectness itself of this challenge testifies to her high level of play. Her son, however, still has a lot to learn about the game of communication.

Penelope’s indirect address to the man claiming to be her husband by way of an apparently direct statement to her son and the implication in her bed trick that she has been a faithful wife represent the two most prevalent forms of indirect communication in the *Odyssey*.⁷ Addressing someone other than the one intended to listen is a tactic that arises early in life when, as small children, we tell visitors about ourselves by directing our words toward our parents. Even the suitors can manage that. Deliberate implication shows more skill and greater awareness of conversation as a game.

Penelope’s entry in Book 1 marks the first instance of indirect address, which will become almost the norm in conversation with more than two people present. When she berates the bard Phemios for his song about misadventure on the return from Troy (337-44), her real targets are the hateful suitors who relish the topic. Telemachus, possibly another indirect addressee, responds to his mother with a harsh reprimand (346-59) that is actually meant, though clumsy in execution, as an attempt to impress upon the suitors that he is now an adult, a man among men. In Book 18, mother and son again indirectly confront the suitors in the guise of a conversation with each other (215-25, 227-42). At the assembly in Book 2 Telemachus and the suitors insult each other by means of addresses to the Ithacan people (40-79, 178-207). Speaking to one party while formally addressing another early on becomes a typical strategy of communication in this epic that scorns the direct approach.

To convey information or sentiments by implication asks for cooperation between interlocutors, so the one who pursues this method and expects

to be met halfway by the other indicates a certain amount of respect for the other's ability to participate. Gauging that ability is part of the game. Odysseus's brilliantly controlled speech to Nausicaa (6.149-85) flatters her by treating her like an adult, since she is asked to read between the lines, and at the same time he makes sure that the adolescent gets very broad hints of his implications: that he has been a leader of men, that he finds her marriageable, that he is a great man brought low, that she has no reason to be afraid. Perhaps he is rather obvious in our eyes, but, since he has left it for her to pick up on the unstated, the inexperienced girl gratefully and eagerly falls for the stranger's lure, especially his disingenuous suggestion of an imminent marriage. Her response implies a worldly awareness of suffering (187-90), and her indirect address to him via her friends about the Phaeacians' close relationship to the gods implies that he will be treated well but he had better behave himself (199-210). His refusal of help with a bath implies that he is no sexual threat (218-22). Her next indirect address awkwardly implies that he would be an ideal husband (239-46), a suggestion she elaborates soon with transparent indirection (273-90). This conversation has won Nausicaa over to the stranger's cause more firmly than a straightforward exchange possibly could: the demands of implications have created a bond of mutual participation, an intimacy that Odysseus is careful, for his benefit, that she misunderstand.

The conversations between Odysseus and the Phaeacians in Books 7 and 8 involve a great amount of implication at a somewhat more subtle level than with Nausicaa. After Odysseus's direct supplication of Arete (7.146-52), we follow a series of implied questions concerning the visitor's identity, background, and abilities; a veiled discussion of the relationship between the stranger and Nausicaa, culminating in an outright proposal by Alcinous that the man marry his daughter, which must then be smoothed over as a blunder; indirect self-characterizations by Odysseus without revealing his identity, suggesting the quantity and seriousness of his woes, his piety, his fame, his participation in the Trojan War, and, after the open offer of marriage, his lack of interest in wedding the girl; indirect insults and reconciliation; and implied plans for an escort home. At the end Alcinous finally comes right out and asks in a long speech for the stranger to tell his story (536-86), launching the Apologue of Books 9-12. Their badinage until this point has been largely conducted at the level of hints and inference with reasonable accuracy of mutual comprehension, typical of the conversations throughout the *Odyssey*. When characters can make themselves understood with suggestion or insinuation, they tend to avoid straightforward statements. Outright assertions or questions expose the speakers; indirect speaking keeps them more securely hidden and protected.

Early in his apprenticeship Telemachus finds himself the middleman, with no apparent awareness of the subtext, in a married couple's indirect conversation rich in implications that amount to hidden meanings. The uneasy reconciliation of Helen and Menelaus finds expression in an encoded swapping of tales ostensibly meant to give their young visitor a picture of his father in Trojan War days, but their discourse is actually directed toward each other. Helen, claiming to be repentant now of her folly years before, tells of once rescuing the disguised Odysseus within the Trojan walls (4.240–64), an anecdote really meant for her husband, who is to understand that she was working for the Greek cause from the inside and deserves to be thought well of now. Menelaus responds in kind with a tale of her treachery at the very end of the war when Helen tried, by mimicry of their wives' voices, to lure the warriors out of the Trojan Horse (271–89). Telemachus hears two fine stories about his father and gives no sign that he is following the exchange below the surface. The married couple, however, who speak each other's language, are engaged in what must have been a common meta-conversation: "I was really on your side." "No, you weren't, you shameless liar."

The Spartan couple understands each other's coded messages as Alcinous deciphers Nausicaa's more simply encrypted request. We see other instances in which the words spoken mask a message understood only by the initiated. When Antinous calls on the suitors to obey Telemachus, he comes very close to making an open admission of their plot to kill the boy, but not quite: it is clear to those in the know, not to anyone else (20.271–74). Odysseus asks for a turn at the bow contest in a way that gives a clear signal of his murderous intention to Telemachus and the herdsmen but goes right by the suitors and Penelope (22.275–84). Once Odysseus has figured out that Penelope's bed ruse (23.174–80) was her test of his identity, he can go further and interpret her choice of this sign as a clear message, not stated openly by either of them, that there is no one else who could have known their secret: the test itself was an encoded implication of her faithfulness. Such exchanges that exclude by-standers without access to the conversation below the surface reflect the nature of dialogue in the *Odyssey* generally: we cannot trust the face value of the words to convey what is in the speaker's mind.

In some instances of hidden meaning, however, we cannot be certain who understands what or even if there is a hidden meaning at all, and a good part of our narrative enjoyment comes from the ambiguity. The recognitions and self-disclosures of Odysseus have spurred some scholarly controversy. Many take Homer at his word that no one recognizes the hero until he says so, whereas others have presented various forms of the argument that Penelope and even Eumaeus have some awareness, ranging from a vague

notion to absolute certainty, well before the formal self-declaration.⁸ The encounters between husband and wife in Books 18 and 19, no matter how one gauges their level of knowledge, are indeed characterized by speeches that, at least in one direction, convey information indirectly or can be interpreted by the listener as a coded message.

The first “conversation” between husband and wife after a twenty-year separation can serve, at least in Odysseus’s mind, as a model for successful indirect communication such as we saw, in a rather spiteful form, with Helen and Menelaus. Athena prompts Penelope to make her first appearance to her husband without telling her the real reason for going downstairs (18.158–68). Typically, there is a discrepancy between Athena’s purpose and Penelope’s stated reason for this unaccustomed move: they have in common that the queen is to show herself before the suitors (though Penelope does not understand why), but Athena wants her to excite the admiration of her husband and son (161–62), whereas Penelope, who does not know that her husband is in the hall, says she will warn her son to beware of the suitors (166–68). In fact, she makes no such warning but rather scolds Telemachus for negligence as a host to the beleaguered stranger, a shortcoming he is in fact feigning to conceal Odysseus’s identity (215–25). She goes on to address the suitors with a narrative whose truth-value is uncertain (except to Odysseus, and he tells us nothing) and then with an admonition that suggests an intention whose sincerity is ambiguous even to the external audience.⁹ She says that her husband upon his departure instructed her to marry another if he had not returned from the war by the time of their son’s emergence into adulthood (that is, now), virtually announcing her impending decision to choose from among them, hateful though such a marriage would be (257–73).¹⁰ She follows up this mixed message of enticement and repulsion with a plea for a proper courtship with gifts, the effectiveness of which perhaps owes something to its being put indirectly (an implied negative comparison to proper suitors of the past) rather than with a direct request (274–80).

The suitors accept her words as both a true account of the past and a promise of her intention to marry soon. Odysseus, on the other hand, receives with joy what another might regard as a direful announcement from the wife he sees and hears now for the first time in twenty years:

Thus she spoke, and much-suffering godlike Odysseus rejoiced,
because she was wheedling gifts from them and was charming their hearts
with soothing words, but her mind was intending other things. (*Odyssey*
18.281–83)

We cannot be certain whether Odysseus is correct that his wife has other intentions nor why he could be confident in his interpretation nor even what he assumes those other intentions to be. In this situation he is in much the same position as the narrative audience trying to analyze the text of this ambiguous speech. He feels certain of his exegesis, but we cannot share his certainty. What we can tell is that, in the spirit of their famous like-mindedness, the hero of indirect communication is imputing some of his craft to his wife and assumes that her words mean something other than what they appear to mean.¹¹ In his mind she is, as it were, directing her speech over the heads of the suitors toward the stranger in the back, who readily decodes her message as a clever subterfuge that works in his favor.

We can agree that the fireside interview between beggar and queen in Book 19 is a treasure house of indirect communication even if we differ widely about which statements are meant to be taken, by us or by either of the interlocutors, at face value and which as encrypted messages. Her tale of the shroud trick and pressure to remarry (137-61), his false autobiography (172-202), her test question (215-19), his detailed reply (221-48), her assertion of her husband's death (257-60), his counter-assertion of his imminent return (268-307),¹² the by-play about washing his feet and his resemblance to Odysseus (317-60), her self-interpreting dream (535-53), his confirmation of the obvious interpretation (555-58), her sudden and bizarre announcement of the bow contest to settle the marriage question (571-81), his approval of this contest and prediction of the winner (583-87)—the entire conversation, which the maids in the room can safely hear with a literal ear, gives us the distinct sense that the real communication is carried on well below the surface of the words, though we cannot be sure exactly what is meant and what is picked up by whom. The only blatant statement in this interview is Penelope's direct quote of the victorious eagle in the dream she claims to have had, who tells her in plain words what the dream signifies (546-53), an interpretation she quickly dismisses as a false prophecy (560-69).

We would like to know what Odysseus and Penelope each understand to be going on during their conversation and to what extent they are attuned to each other's mind, but we must resign ourselves to informed speculation and intuition. Our imperfect knowledge leads us to the recognition that the characters of the *Odyssey* are not the only practitioners of indirect communication. I would attribute the notorious ambiguity of Book 19 to the ethos of obfuscation in the epic and place our narrator among those who practice indirection with no compunction.¹³ Another author, Tolstoy for example, who regularly interprets signs the reader might not catch and conveys his characters' actual thoughts, would be happy to clari-

fy the situation and leave us in no doubt that Penelope knows or does not know, that Odysseus knows she knows or does not know whether she knows and so on. Homer, however, is not always interested in the direct communication of the characters' true knowledge or conjectures.¹⁴ Rather, he delights in giving us hints.

The second half of the *Odyssey* is essentially a grand performance, with Odysseus as director as well as lead actor, guiding the rest of the cast in what they might or might not realize to be roles in his show. His false autobiographies form the most salient contribution to this atmosphere,¹⁵ and they are joined by the techniques of indirection already discussed as well as close relatives of lies that create a false presentation of reality designed to attain victory and reunion: feigned ignorance, concealment of facts, false reasons, evasion, secrecy, disguised feelings, indirect direction of the plot, and words to preserve a false persona.

We have seen such performances throughout the *Odyssey*, and not only by its hero. Athena sets the tone even before her impersonation of Mentès when she steers the Olympian conversation away from Zeus's topic to the family that matters to her and pretends to believe that her favorite is hated by Zeus, thereby getting the plot of the *Odyssey* under way. This goddess serves as the divine embodiment of the very set of attributes we have been talking about—trickery, lies, deception, communication by indirection. She then visits Telemachus in disguise and gives him advice in an underhanded fashion. She sends him off to Pylos and Sparta for, as she tells him and has already told Zeus, the purpose of learning about his father (93–95, 280–92), but she later confesses to his father that her true mission was to make a man out of him (13.421–24). She could tell the boy directly and fully all he wants to know about Odysseus, but the indirect nature of communication she helps to promote in this narrative serves her purpose here whereas a straightforward message would ruin the plan. The point is not for Telemachus to know the facts but rather for him to advance toward adulthood so that he will rise to the demands of his conspiratorial role on his return. Secrecy is vital to attain this end. The false reason for his journey and the concealment of the facts lead to the maturity and self-confidence she needs him to gain to be of practical help to his father upon their reunion.

A similar and more important instance of divine misleading arises when Odysseus asks Circe permission to depart. She gives him the bad news that he must first enter the kingdom of Hades to consult the prophet Teiresias, for, she says,

“He will tell you the road and measures of the path
and how you will make the return on the fishy sea.” (*Odyssey* 10.539–40)

Teiresias does no such thing. He barely mentions the sea voyage and tells Odysseus nothing on that score that Circe does not already know. Later, the goddess herself gives detailed instructions for the journey (12.25-27, 37-110). The trip to the underworld has been superfluous, a pointless agony, if we are to believe Circe, and some erudite readers have taken Circe at her word and have worked out explanations, defenses, and solutions as drastic as excising all of Book 11.¹⁶ But the underworld adventure does belong here. It is central to the development of Odysseus's character and to the themes of identity, family, and mortality. It is telling that Odysseus himself does not think the journey superfluous at all. Unlike many scholars, he is not upset with Circe for sending him on a wild goose chase when she had the information all along. Like Telemachus's voyage, this journey has had as its object something more profound than the specious reason given by the dispatching goddess. After two or three years of listless wandering and malingering with no particular sense of urgency, Odysseus has reached an ambivalence that must turn into determination if he is to make Ithaca the priority and the Trojan War an episode of the past. His conversations with Anticleia, Agamemnon, and Achilles about fathers, wives, and sons encourage him not to dwell on his previous persona and push him toward reaffirming his Ithacan identity as son, husband, and father.¹⁷ If we believe Circe's actual words, we have missed the point. Odysseus, in this case, is a better reader than most of us. He knows the idiom. He knows how language can be used to conceal the true message. He can read between the lines.

Hermes gives a splendid cameo performance in his scene with Calypso. When he comes to order Odysseus off the island, the goddess's reception of her visitor (5.87-91) betrays the suspicion the perceptive characters properly maintain toward friendly overtures, and she is treated to what Hermes calls a truthful account of his mission, a sure sign of disingenuousness (97-115). He feigns reluctance to take on this duty, implying that she too must accede though reluctant, and pretends to know little about this person she has on the island or what he means to her; he implies that Athena has nothing to do with it, that fate is to blame. Calypso is no less talented an actress. When Hermes leaves, she approaches Odysseus with the new plan as though it were her idea, and she tries to steer him away from accepting the offer by falsely implying that she is eager for his departure but is not so sure about the gods' willingness; she feigns compassion and invents troubles ahead that Hermes said nothing of (160-70, 182-91, 203-13). Odysseus does not fall for her performance, convincing though it might have been. Master actor that he is, the hero has learned to be as suspicious of others' words as others should be of his. Only after a thorough examination will he decide which lines to believe and which to dismiss as false.

He brings that attitude with him to Ithaca. It would be out of keeping with the ethos of the *Odyssey* for Odysseus to make a direct approach to regaining his position on Ithaca, practical problems aside. In fact, I suspect we generally overemphasize the practical in considering his behavior. Despite the urge to insist that Odysseus must keep his secret from Penelope and Eumaeus so that they do not blow his cover or so that he can test their loyalty, the essential reason Odysseus maintains the pretense before even his eminently and obviously loyal wife and swineherd till the last possible moment is that in his world the straightforward must on principle be avoided.

That practicality is not necessarily the main point can be seen in the fascinating encounter with Laertes after the slaughter of the suitors. With nothing to gain by it, Odysseus treats his father to a false tale that causes him needless grief.¹⁸ This apparently absurd behavior makes sense only by considering the nature of conversation in the *Odyssey* as a whole. Fortright speaking implies either naïveté or trust. A winner, a survivor, in this world does not walk straight toward the destination but approaches it obliquely. The goal is to come out a winner, even if that means needless pain or prolongation of uncertainty along the way. Odysseus, the most successful player of this game, has great respect for the power of indirection, and he maintains this course until directness is absolutely necessary to go on. He keeps all his loved ones on a need-to-know basis, and he follows faithfully his strategy of keeping everyone in the dark until the last possible moment in order for his plot to succeed.

As a director who cannot afford to be seen as such, Odysseus enjoins secrecy on those who know his identity and must use indirect methods to steer the course of events and the thoughts and decisions of those unaware. For a while those in on the secret do not know who else is in that club. Telemachus, the first and, as far as he knows, the only one to join the plot, stays in character when, alone with Eurycleia, he asks about “the stranger” and speaks badly of Penelope’s treatment of him (20.129–33); she, also in character after threat of death if she slips (19.482–90), defends her mistress without letting on that the man is no stranger (135–43). Neither knows that they are both part of the same conspiracy until he fails to astound her after the battle with the revelation that she is summoned by his “father” (22.397). When Odysseus orders Eumaeus to have Eurycleia lock up the women before the battle, the swineherd, new to the deception game after his clumsy but successful delivery of the bow to his master, keeps the secret by telling the maid falsely that Telemachus gave the order (21.381–85), ignorant of her participation in the plot. From the outset, keeping facts and plans concealed from opponents and friends alike has been an important feature of Odyssean conversation: when the gods make their plans secretly in Poseidon’s absence

(1.19–95), Athena holds a secret conversation with Telemachus (1.123–318), Telemachus demands that Eurycleia stay mum about his departure (2.349–76), and the suitors plot an ambush against Telemachus (4.632–72, 770–77). The concealment of Odysseus’s identity and plot on Ithaca through lies, misleading speeches in character, suppression of true feelings, and evasions of direct answers is the grand, sustained culmination of a pattern that characterizes conversation throughout.

If Odysseus is going to control the plot from a position of secrecy, he will not have much opportunity to guide the other characters’ actions in a straightforward manner. Athena, as so often, shows at the beginning the technique her favorite will employ masterfully. Her opening speech is a model of indirect goading (1.45–62): she reaffirms Zeus’s sentiments about Aegisthus, about whom she cares nothing at this point, pretends that Zeus is hard-hearted toward Odysseus after describing his plight, and asks a suggestive question. Without coming out with an open request, she maneuvers Zeus into taking steps to get her hero back home. Her initial strategy, as Mentès, with Telemachus includes feigned surprise at the presence and outrageous behavior of the suitors (1.224–29), a detailed account of the sorry condition of Laertes (188–93), the pointed question whether he is his father’s son (206–12), a tale (possibly false) suggesting Odysseus’s vicious streak and vengeful nature (253–66), and an indirect comparison between Telemachus and Orestes (296–302). In this context of indirect goading, her explicit advice (269–85) sinks in readily.

Odysseus reprises Athena’s role upon meeting his son in Eumaeus’s hut. At first Odysseus stays quiet while the other two speak to him indirectly. Telemachus almost phrases his question of the stranger’s identity so as to address Odysseus but technically puts it to Eumaeus (16.57–59); after summarizing the visitor’s false tale Eumaeus, though formally addressing Telemachus, informs the stranger that he is handing him over to the young man (61–67); Telemachus recaps his situation at home for the stranger by telling Eumaeus about his inability to offer proper hospitality (69–89). When Odysseus breaks into the conversation (91–111), he feigns ignorance of the boy’s plight with the suitors and goads him indirectly with his question,

“Tell me, do you willingly subject yourself, or do the people throughout the land hate you, following the voice of a god, or do you put any blame on your brothers, whom a man trusts when they’re fighting if a great quarrel arises?” (*Odyssey* 16.95–98)

He wishes he were young again and able to combat their outrage, since he would rather die than see it perpetrated in his house. At great length he, like Athena, offers his son an outsider’s view of the anomalous situation with the

implication that there is no reason to put up with it. Telemachus's shame could not be more skillfully aroused by a direct assault, and he now stands ready to meet his father and join in his plot. Odysseus performs a similar ploy to get a rise out of Laertes (24.244-79), and he encourages Penelope at the interview to ask him further questions and excites her curiosity by pretending to be coy and unwilling to talk about himself (19.107-22). Odysseus's manner of directing the scenes consists to a great extent in putting others in a state of mind or getting them to take an action without actually telling them what to think or do.

When the point of one's words is to manipulate the situation to suit one's interests rather than to reveal and communicate, conversation is game and performance. The game of language in the *Odyssey* can be playful at times, but essentially the obfuscatory use of speech reflects a treacherous and precarious world in which survival and happiness depend on assuming that appearance is deceiving and the straightforward is masking a reality that must be deciphered. Those who play the game well listen carefully to what is not stated outright and express what they mean by not saying what they mean.

Notes

¹ All translations of the *Odyssey* are my own, meant to be literal rather than literary.

² As Walcot (1977, 14) observes, "No one can permit himself the luxury of trusting anyone else in Homer's world." For an analysis of this world in terms of the spy novel, see Richardson (2006b).

³ Tannen (1986) bases her sociolinguistic analysis of conversation on the premise that indirect communication is the norm in human interaction.

⁴ The *Odyssey* is a very talk-oriented epic. According to my count, of the 12,110 lines of the *Odyssey*, 8219 are in direct speech (67.9%). If we discount Books 9-12, almost entirely Odysseus's first-person tales of his adventures, 5996 lines out of 9877 are in direct speech (60.7%).

⁵ Todorov (1971, 70) suggests that speaking is the principal sign of the boy's growing up: "Le passage de Télémaque de l'adolescence à la virilité est marqué presque uniquement par le fait qu'il commence à parler." I would add that to begin to speak is, for the son of Odysseus, to begin to conceal through speaking; to be an adult in his world is to know how to use language to undermine or to distract from the truth.

⁶ De Jong (1994, 38-39) discusses these passages in the context of a study of unspoken thoughts.

⁷ In her commentary de Jong (2001) notes each instance of indirect address, which she calls "indirect dialogue" and defines in the glossary: "A talks to B about character C or about things which concern C (and which he intends C to hear) without addressing C" (xiv). I count 69 speeches in which a person not addressed is the principal intended recipient of the message and 86 speeches in which important

information (sometimes false) is not stated outright but must be inferred by someone listening carefully. Not included are instances of possibly encoded messages or statements with a hidden meaning that an uninformed listener would not be able to infer.

⁸ Since Harsh's controversial proposal (1950) of Penelope's early recognition of her husband, many have weighed in on the question of how much Penelope knows or suspects before her overt recognition in book 23. See especially Whitman (1958, 303-04), Amory (1963), Austin (1975, 200-38), Russo (1982), Emlyn-Jones (1984), Winkler (1990), and Katz (1991). Roisman (1990) argues for an early recognition of his master by Eumaeus.

⁹ Various recent interpretations of Penelope's motivation and speech and of Odysseus's amused reaction can be found in Austin (1975, 208-10), Van Nortwick (1979), Emlyn-Jones (1984, 9-12), Byre (1988), Winkler (1990, 146-47), Katz (1991, 78-93), Russo (1992, 58-67), and de Jong (1994, 40-42).

¹⁰ De Jong (2001, 467) observes that in the interview of Book 19 Penelope fails to mention to the beggar these instructions of Odysseus that she remarry when giving him an apparently thorough account of her predicament; "this suggests that the instructions were her invention."

¹¹ De Jong (1994) brings out their like-mindedness in her analysis of the couple's unspoken thoughts (47) and concludes, "Their capacity to control their emotions, to remain silent, or to say something other than what they feel, marks Penelope and especially Odysseus as the typical heroes of the *Odyssey*, poem of disguise and dissimulation" (48).

¹² Odysseus introduces this lie with the tell-tale avowal of truth: "for I will tell you truly and I will not conceal" (19.269). As Todorov (1971, 73) perceptively observes, "L'invocation de la vérité est un signe de mensonge."

¹³ For a discussion of the various ways in which this narrator proves to be a participant in the game of indirection, see Richardson (2006a).

¹⁴ Winkler (1990, 143) admonishes us not "to assume that Homer is an utterly transparent narrator, always telling us all that can be known. As the characters he describes are normally devious and cautious about their words, so we should not deny to Homer too the possibility that he will avail himself of a certain cunning in setting out the cross-purposes of his plot." In speaking of the plurality and complexity of narratives in the *Odyssey*, Slatkin (1996, 229) says "it is clear that it is not easy for an audience to get a straight story, to discriminate among stories, or even to know what a straight story is." In preparation for an analysis of two narrative problems in the *Odyssey*, Scodel (1998, 1) asserts "a common narrative technique: the narrator seeks to generate both suspense and significance by misdirecting the audience about the role the gods are to play in the action." Parry (1994), on the other hand, who sees the poet as "the most important recorder of the truthful past" (12), champions the view that Homer is to be trusted.

¹⁵ The literature on lies and disguise in the *Odyssey* is extensive. Some of the more helpful discussions can be found in Stanford (1950), Trahman (1952), Todorov (1971), Heatherington (1976), Stewart (1976), Walcot (1977), Haft (1984), Emlyn-Jones (1986), Murnaghan (1987), Roisman (1990), Bowie (1993), Pratt (1993), Parry (1994), Reece (1994), Richardson (1996), and King (1999). Lateiner (1995) shows

how facial gestures, body language, and other nonverbal behavior can convey the truth behind concealing words or, when manipulated with talent, enhance the liar's performance; on Odysseus's exploitation of the nonverbal in his lies and disguises, see especially chapters 5 (83-92) and 9 (167-202).

¹⁶ Page (1955) is typical of the analyst's inclination to excise all or much of Book 11.

¹⁷ It is interesting that the conversations in the underworld scene seem themselves straightforward and honest, with no undercurrent of hidden messages or innuendo. The characters mean what they say.

¹⁸ See Scodel (1998) for a recent discussion of Odysseus's motivation in lying to Laertes and an assessment of previous interpretations. Winkler (1990, 134-36) discusses this scene in the context of the contemporary practice in Mediterranean villages to lie and conceal even to family members as a matter of course. See also Friedl (1962), Walcot (1977, 18-19), and Most (1989) on the Mediterranean penchant for lying on principle, which would account for the lie to Laertes (18-19).

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