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Originality and Intentionality

This discussion has to do with the much vexed relationship between the conventional and the personal (or "autonomous," "original") in literary production. By way of introduction, we may consider the following parable, which not only concretizes some of the more abstract theoretical considerations to follow, but also offers something like an extreme case of "originality" in antiquity, and of society's response to it. It is the case of Heraclitus. In Diogenes Laertius' biography of him he is described as a supercilious loner, antisocial in the extreme, preferring knuckle-bones with youngsters in the temple of Artemis to the political life of his adult fellow Ephesians. Absolutely self-educated, he claimed that he knew all there was to know, but that his predecessors, by contrast, knew nothing, including Homer, who he thought deserved a flogging, and Hesiod, who couldn't, he said, tell that day and night were really one. He authored a treatise *On Nature* purposely filled with obscurity, we're told, precisely to avoid the contempt bred of conventional familiarity. Like so many other ancient biographies, the story of his end is a masterpiece of conventional poetic justice, served up out of the stockpot of his own trivialized apothegms, the system's vengeance paid out for his mockery of it. Diogenes tells us that Heraclitus' misanthropy reached such a pitch of intensity that he left society altogether to wander in the mountains, sustaining himself on grass and herbs, until dropsy forced him back to the city and to the practitioners of medicine. Even in these direst of circumstances, he is represented as incapable of a straight statement. Unregenerate riddler to the end, he asks them if they can turn a rainstorm into a drought. When they show no comprehension, Heraclitus buries himself in warm cowdung to draw off the moist humor, but to no avail, and so dies: a fitting end for a man who had said "It is death for souls to become water" (fr. 26), and "A dry soul is wisest and best" (fr. 118), and "Corpses are more worthless than dung" (fr. 96). Here was a strange man indeed, whose proverbial remoteness and dark unintelligibility seemed to contradict his own

strong reminder that "we must follow that which is common . . . for even though the *logos* is common, the many live as if each man possessed his own private wisdom" (fr. 2).

Much of that story is doubtless apocryphal, but it serves nonetheless as a paradigm of the consequences attending behavioral and linguistic un-conventionality, or better, of the ancient Greek attitude toward it, and perhaps, within a narrow range of variability, of all societies toward it. If Heraclitus follows any convention, it is, as he himself intimates, the con-vention of Delphi, neither naming things nor wholly concealing them, but signifying them (fr. 93). Unfortunately, part of that same convention is the appearance of madness. And ancient Greeks seemed readier to allow linguistic irregularity in Apollo's spokeswoman than in one's fellow townsman.

If we look for more extreme examples of "originality" and widen our horizon beyond the Greek context, Heraclitus seems not quite so bizarre. After all, learned men have made and continue to make sense out of him, some of it, sad to say, even pretty banal and conventional sense. But in our search for more monstrous examples of "originality" — purely in the interests of defining the limits of our discussion — we might have difficulty surpassing the so-called Voynich manuscript first discovered in Prague in 1666. "Its 204 pages comprise," in George Steiner's description, "a putative code of 29 symbols recurring in what appear to be ordered 'syllabic' units. The text gives every semblance of common non-alphabetic substitution. It has, up to the present time, resisted every technique of cryptoanalysis including computer-simulation." It has been conjectured, Steiner continues, that "we are, in fact, looking at an elaborate nonsense structure, an assemblage of systematic, recurrent, rule-governed characters signifying strictly nothing."[1]

From a purely linguistic point of view, the opposition between originality and convention logically opens up a wide spectrum of language-events that make us wonder about its usefulness as a critical or analytic tool, or at least about the reasons for our own dogged attraction to the idea of origins, originality, creativity.[2] At one pole of such a spectrum we find, in Steiner's words "a pathology of Babel, autistic strategies which attach hermetic meanings to certain sounds or which deliberately invert the lexical, habitual usage of words. At the other extreme, we encounter the

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[1] G. Steiner, After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (Oxford 1975) 168.
[2] On the fascination with origins and originality, see especially E. W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York 1975).

currency of banal idiom, the colloquial shorthand of daily chatter from which constant exchange has all but eroded any particular substance."[3] But all new language-events, even the most solipsistic or eccentric of them, "will be parasitic on a public and preceding model"; the Voynich manuscript is a clear instance of that, and although the issue continues to be debated hotly, most philosophers argue against the possibility of a purely "private language." One of them characterizes the situation as follows: "a privately referring-with-a-word person is not a referring-with-a-word person at all. A person who is privately referring with a word is not a logical possibility."[4]

That there are no private speech-acts is a natural conclusion of modern linguistic theory. The basic distinction on which modern linguistics is based is Ferdinand de Saussure's separation of language as *langue* from language as *parole*.[5] Language as *langue* is a finite system, a compulsory code, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, whose existence is merely virtual, but out of which are generated an infinite number of actual utterances — language as *parole*. Learning a language is not a matter of memorizing actual utterances — *parole*; it is rather a matter of assimilating, in most cases, wholly unconsiously, the system of rules and norms — *langue* — out of which the speaker may generate utterances, many, perhaps most, of which are unprecedented, but none of which can be said to be truly private.

In assessing the work of individual artists against the background of their respective literary conventions, the archaic Greeks themselves did not appear to have concerned themselves very much if at all with originality, creativity, newness, the unprecedented, the personal and private, but rather with the standard of *excellence*. Excellence differentiates *performance* within a conventional system: it evaluates *parole* in terms of agility or virtuosity — a combinatorial skill — in exploiting the potentialities of the underlying *langue*. Excellence is relatively easy to recognize, for *competence* in the *langue* (which in all language-users far outstrips their

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[3] Steiner (above, note 1) 171.

[4] M. Perkins, Two Arguments Against a Private Language, in E. Morlick (ed.), Wittgenstein and the Problem of Other Minds (New York 1967) 109. See also N. Garver, Wittgenstein on Private Language, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 20 (1960) 389—96.

[5] E. de Saussure, Cours de linguistique générale, ed. by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (1916, repr. Paris 1960). See also R. S. Wells, De Saussure's System of Linguistics, in Michael Lane (ed.), Structuralism: a Reader (London 1970) 85—123, esp. 102—107; J. Culler, Structural Poetics (London 1975) 8—10; P. Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth 1976) 2—6.

actual *performance*) allows one to recognize both ungrammaticality and virtuosity, even though the listener himself may be incapable of the latter at the level of *performance*. Now "originality" suggests *newness* – what has not appeared before in the range of remembered *paroles*. But if an utterance is comprehended, it must by definition have been a possibility or potentiality of the underlying system. In these terms, *true* originality is a chimera, having more the nature of an effect than a cause. And it is axiomatic that, among those who analyze literature and other cultural manifestations from this linguistic perspective, the notion of the "subject" is rejected; it is "deconstrúcted" or "dissolved" as its functions are more properly attributed to the interpersonal systems that operate through it. While such a notion may seem an assault on the humanism cherished among practitioners of philology, it does not seem far from the tradition of the muse-inspired bards who thought of themselves more as graceful repeaters than as creators of the new and unprecedented.

Newness. That may in fact have less to do with saying something un-precedented (i.e., original) than with reinvesting the conventional with a sense of wonder, or in shattering the routine of a *narrowly performed*, publicly unexploited *langue* by this sense of wonder. The muses' gift is neither ordinary nor automatic, the meaningless endowment of what is already possessed in superfluity. It is prayed for or it comes unexpected, bearing all the character of a theophany. I do not mean to verge here into obscurantism or mystification. The sense of wonder to which I refer is not altogether mysterious: it is a *shock*, a departure from the habitual, an assault on perceptual and linguistic anaesthesia, but if it bears meaning and communicates – as opposed to the shocking, attention-getting, but un-intelligible ravings of the madman (Heraclitus occupies, or better *dances* on the unstable borderline between these two states) – then it involves "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*), a term given a great deal of currency by the Russian Formalist, Victor Shklovsky, who makes it, in fact, the distinctive feature which separates literature from other linguistic modes.[6]

Defamiliarization aims at a heightening of active awareness as a counter-measure to the lethargic torpor and erosion of meaning that results from

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[6] On the concept of "defamiliarization," see L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis (edd. and trans.), Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays (Lincoln, Neb. 1965) esp. the first essay, and F. Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton 1972) 50 ff.

habitual usage and perception. It is akin to the revolt of the Romantics against "custom," well characterized when Coleridge remarks, on Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, that he wanted "to give the charm of novelty to the things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."[7] Coleridge's words, "feeling analogous to the supernatural," should remind us that Rudolf Otto's description of the sacred, which for him is "the wholly unfamiliar" (*Das ganz Andere*), as *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, highlights the element of shock.[8] And the "film of familiarity and selfish solicitude" blinding us to the "wonders of the world" is precisely the condition which, in Hesiod's description, the muse-inspired bard dispels when he makes a man forget his private cares and puts him in mind of the wonderful deeds of gods and heroes (*Theogony* 98–103).

The process of revelation by concealment or estrangement is seen at work in its simplest forms in riddles, conundrums, puns, sexual euphemisms, where, like the Delphic oracle in Heraclitus, meaning is conveyed by avoiding conventional names, contexts, descriptions, where the goal often seems as much to heighten and refine awareness itself as to convey an idea or an object. It works against taking things for granted, and in this *it works against myth*. Except where the term is used loosely, myth is the stoutest embodiment of conventional reality; it maintains perceptual numbness from generation to generation. Even in form it is anonymous, lacking a unifying *conscious* intentionality, "speaking in men without their being aware of it" as Lévi-Strauss has said.[9] In its struggle to overcome or refine or even revivify myth, defamiliarization faces an endless Sisyphean task, for myth in infinitely voracious in conventionalizing or naturalizing everything. As Roland Barthes observes "Myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. . . . It wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious degraded survival . . . [and] turns them into speaking corpses. . . . It can

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[7] Biographia Literaria, ch. 13, para. 2.

[8] R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. by J. W. Harvy (Oxford 1958, orig. 1917) esp. chaps. 4–6.

[9] C. Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked, trans. by J. and D. Weightman (New York 1969, orig. 1964) 12.

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even, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it."[10]

The antagonism between defamiliarization and myth suggests a possible approach to distinguishing convention from artistic intentionality in the Homeric poems. (Note: *intentionality*, not *originality* or *creativity*.) Shklovsky has shown that one of the ways in which defamiliarization operates is at the level of narrative, where it gives primacy to plot and verbal texture over story or myth, where it takes the traditional story and retards, displaces, dismantles it, and introduces word-play, figures of speech, irony, satire — disruptive activities all, forcing us to be conscious of this language-event not as mere disposable medium (as in myth) but as *object*, as a *work*.[11] But for the fact that their conventions are so poorly documented, the Homeric poems would seem an ideal case for studying intentional defamiliarization of traditional narrative, occupying as they do a position between the artless anonymity of myth at one end of the spectrum and, at the other, a kind of literature (of which Greek tragedy is perhaps the clearest case) at once obsessed with *ipsissima verba* and intent on making very *explicit* its departure from tradition. For a poorly documented convention — that is, one in which as analysts we cannot distinguish familiar from unfamiliar, we cannot speak of defamiliarization unless the "sudden changes of context or viewpoint" carry enough of the old with them to allow us to see both old and new together. In other words, it may be in instances where the poet is, from one perspective, sloppy at his job, clumsy, illogical, where in some places traditional philology might argue the case for interpolation, that, paradoxically, intentionality may be most in evidence. For from our present linguistic perspective, it is as reasonable, perhaps more so, to assume not always elegant disruptive activity on traditional material by a single author intent on an unprecedented signification, as to assume interpolation within an original and perfect text by one or more *other* minds.

A simple example of this kind of disruption occurs in *Odyssey* 9, where the still green olive-wood club of Polyphemus, heated in the fire, is said to "glow terribly through and through, even though it was green": χλωρός περ ἐών, διεφαίνετο δ' αἰνῶς (381). It has been observed that this is precisely the opposite of what one should expect of fresh olive wood in a fire, and that the formula διεφαίνετο δ' αἰνῶς comes from a traditional

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[10] R. Barthes, Mythologies, trans. by A. Lavers (New York 1972, orig. 1957) 133, 135, 142.

[11] B. Eichenbaum in Lemon and Reis (above, note 6) 119. See also H. N. Schneidau, Sacred Discontent: the Bible and Western Tradition (Berkeley 1977) 271–274.

context in which a metal object is used (a spit, perhaps, on which a technologically more sophisticated Polyphemus roasts his victims?), while χλωρός περ ἐών is an awkward, unsatisfactory makeshift to cover the disruption.[12] What the replacement of metal by olive-wood may intend need not be argued in detail here, but it would take little effort to show how neatly it falls into a pattern of other artistic choices calculated to highlight the distance of Polyphemus from culture.

A less simple but thematically weightier example is the insertion of Book 11 into the narrative of the *Odyssey*. The visit to Tiresias is motivated as follows: beginning at 10.490, Circe tells Odysseus he must visit the underworld to learn from the blind prophet ὁδὸν καὶ μέτρα κελεύθου νόστον τε – the measured or measurable stages of his journey home. But Tiresias tells him nothing of the ὁδὸν καὶ μέτρα κελεύθου and precious little about the νόστον, but concentrates on the aftermath of the return and the propitiation of Poseidon. Odysseus then returns to Circe's island for the obsequies of Elpenor, whose accidental death at the end of Book 10, described with a black humor unparalleled in Homer, had gone unnoticed, but whose shade is the first one encountered by Odysseus in Book 11. After the funeral rites, Circe herself tells Odysseus the ὁδὸν καὶ μέτρα κελεύθου – the measured stages represented by the Sirens, the Wandering Rocks, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Cattle of the Sun, *ending* where Tiresias had *begun*. All this points up the fact that the *motivation* cited in Book 10 for the visit to Tiresias in Book 11 is definitely not its *function*, for Circe fulfills that function herself in Book 12. This has the effect of drawing our attention all the more to the question of function in the visit to Tiresias. What that function is, again, we do not have space to elaborate here,[13] but it would be difficult to discount that the rough joins argue to intentionality.

[12] D. Page, The Homeric Odyssey (Oxford 1955) 10−11.

[13] In a yet unpublished monograph on the *Odyssey*, I have attempted to analyze the function of the visit to Tiresias. The general thesis of that monograph is that many of the narrative idiosyncrasies of the *Odyssey* can be explained as the collision of, and attempted mediation between two different kinds of narrative structure: one tending to stress the mortality and relative impotence of man in the face of what might the termed most generally *consistent external resistence* – the will of the gods, "fate," laws of nature inferred from experience, the incommensurability of the world, the inevitability of death; the other representing an optimistic, wish-fulfilling emancipation from this external resistance, born of human desire. The prophecy of Tiresias, as well as the prophecy of Nausithous about the ultimate fate of the Phaeacians – both unfulfilled within the confines of the *Odyssey* – are, I would suggest, strategems of silence to avoid saying "yes" to one system of organizing experience and "no" to another, in a higher and more complicated system – the poem –

Intentionality. Not "originality" or "creativity" understood after the analogy of creation *ex nihilo*. Not even "intent" understood as a fully shaped idea prior to and separable from the speech act that embodies it, and which when accessible apart from the speech act is mistakenly thought to serve as the only valid criterion of interpretation. The author's "intention is often unknown, sometimes redundant, sometimes useless, and sometimes even harmful as regards interpretation of the verbal meaning of his work. In even the better cases it has to be taken into account in the light of the text itself."[14] The so-called "intentional fallacy" overlooks the semantic autonomy of the text, rooted in the impersonal structure of *langue*. But there is an opposite fallacy – the one we have adverted to in speaking of the tendency to eliminate or "deconstruct" the subject. It does not account for the fact that a non-mythic text remains "a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone about something." Paul Ricoeur is, I think, right when he says that "it is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects, i.e., to things that are not man made, but which, like pebbles, are found in the sand,"[15] (which is precisely the thing Lévi-Strauss claims of myth[16]). Intentionality accounts for the desire to make use of the impersonal code, to mean the unprecedented, rather than to repeat the constantly eroding given. Against convention or tradition or myth it seems to me finally more fruitful to set this term *intentionality*, which realizes itself through what I have called a "combinatorial skill," – perhaps better "combinatorial *daring*," the two of them best understood as a continuous

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that only precariously maintains them both. In other words, the prophecy of Tiresias, unmarked as to its fulfillment, permits what the Russian Formalists call a "zero-degree" ending, neither explicitly "tragic" or explicitly "comic," but capable of becoming charged with either value.

[14] Ricoeur (above, note 5) 76. See also M. Hancher, Three Kinds of Intention, Modern Languages Notes 87 (1972) 827–851.

[15] Ibid. 30.

[16] Lévi-Strauss (above, note 9) 10: "Mythology has no obvious practical function: . . . it is not directly linked with a different kind of reality, which is endowed with a higher degree of objectivity than its own and whose injunctions it might therefore transmit to minds that seem perfectly free to indulge their creative spontaneity. And so, if it were possible to prove in this instance, too, that the apparent arbitrariness of the mind, its supposed spontaneous flow of inspiration, and its seemingly uncontrolled inventiveness imply the existence of laws operating at a deeper level, we would inevitably be forced to conclude that when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operations are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things."

operation. Merleau-Ponty considers *rearrangement* a major mode of realizing new meaning, of bridging the gap, formed by the inadequacy of existent signifiers, between intention and communication. The intention to signify, he says, acquires self-awareness and embodiment, at one and the same time, in the search for an equivalent in the system of available signifiers. It is a matter of realizing a certain arrangement of these already signifying instruments, which elicits in the listener or reader the inkling of a new and different signification and inversely accomplishes for the speaker or writer what Merleau-Ponty calls the "anchorage" of a meaning unprecedented in already available meanings.[17]

This "inkling of a new and different signification" teases the faculty of interpretation, and the greater the disruption of the system, the greater the need and effort of interpretation, and the longer the life earned for the text – like the words of Heraclitus who, even though he may have struck many of his contemporaries as a raving lunatic, is like the Sibyl of his own fragment 92, "with madness in her voice uttering things unlaughable, unembellished, and unperfumed, yet reaching over a thousand years with her voice, thanks to the god."

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[17] M. Merleau-Ponty, Sur La phénomenologie du langage, in: Éloge de la philosophie (Paris 1963) 97. Compare the remark of Wittgenstein (Tractatus Log.-Phil. 4.03): "A proposition must use old expressions to communicate new sense."