The Ears of Hermes
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Communication, Images, and Identity in the Classical World

Maurizio Bettini

Translated by William Michael Short
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This English translation of Maurizio Bettini’s *Le orecchie di Hermes* follows the publication of the original Italian edition by ten years and the appearance of *Anthropology and Roman Culture* by twenty. Yet even a decade after *Le orrechie*’s initial publication, it is difficult to overstate the significance of this work for Anglophone classicists. Conceived as a companion volume to *Anthropology and Roman Culture*, this collection of essays presents a new phase of Bettini’s scholarship that both broadens and sharpens the focus of the approach he articulated there. In *Anthropology and Roman Culture*, Bettini introduced several specific lines of inquiry and theoretical perspectives that have characterized his unique brand of Roman anthropology. The essays in this volume reflect Bettini’s ongoing commitment to an unambiguously “emic” level of cultural analysis, and here readers will find further evidence of how successfully Bettini continues to integrate traditional techniques of classical studies with modern anthropological theories and methods. In particular, this book demonstrates the potential of bringing aspects of Clifford Geertz’s symbolic anthropology and Yuri Lotman’s cultural semiotics to bear on an understanding of Roman cultural forms. The two chapters that frame the work exemplify this approach. In “Hermes’ Ears” Bettini analyzes a series of myths and beliefs associated with that god in order to explore, through a kind of Geertzian “thick description,” the place of vocal communication in the Roman imaginary—tracing the highly intricate “web of meanings” (to
use one of Geertz’s terms) that surrounds this god through ritual practice, social behavior, folk belief, and mythological representation. The analytical movement in this case runs from symbol to structure, asking how the diverse meanings of Hermes/Mercury as a cultural category manifest themselves throughout the Roman semiosphere. In “Argumentum,” on the other hand, Bettini reconstructs a cultural model that underwrites Roman society’s interest in and practice of the interpretation of signs—moving conversely from structure to symbol in explicating the Roman conception of inference from signs through an analysis of *argumentum’s* various senses and contexts.

By applying to the study of Roman society and culture the same anthropological “gaze” that Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne have dedicated so fruitfully to Greek culture, Bettini thus succeeds in offering original insights valuable to philologists, archaeologists, scholars of the literary tradition, historians, anthropologists and historians of art alike. In Part 1 (*Mythology*), for example, Bettini reconstructs a representative mythological story, demonstrating by comparison with beliefs and stories from other cultures how the legend of Brutus incorporates conventional themes and images of folklore—belying the still widespread belief that Roman culture eschewed the mythic and the fantastic. In the second part (*Social Practices*), Bettini looks at behavior and interaction in the public space, showing first how the Roman *mores* are a socially constructed category whose meaning varies according to what Maurice Halbwachs called “social frameworks,” then how Roman culture’s divergent metaphorical understandings of physical appearance in general and of the face in particular (*os, vultus, forma*, and so on) interact with what were perceived as the important traits of the “person” at Rome and the way in which this “person” was represented publically. Along with “Face to Face in Ancient Rome,” the three chapters that comprise the third part (*Doubles and Images*) return to the central theme of Bettini’s *The Portrait of the Lover* (University of California Press, 1999), namely, Roman society’s obsession with doubles and images. Whereas his previous focus was on the literary motif of the lover wooing the substitute image of his or her absent beloved, now Bettini addresses this unique aspect of Roman culture as it shapes Sosia’s interpretation of his encounter with his own *Doppelgänger* in Plautus’ *Amphitruo*; then through a reflection on the meaning of *imagines, effigies,* and *simulacra* in Roman culture; and finally in relation to aristocratic funerary practices under the Republic.

Laura Gibbs produced early drafts of some chapters, which I then systematically revised and reworked to agree in style, tone and expression with my own translations of the remaining bulk of chapters. These were completed at various times and for various purposes, often because I found them germane to my own research. The English translation excludes some
chapters of the original Italian edition which were felt not to relate directly to the book’s central thematic thread, while a more recent essay by Bettini on “Death and Its Double” has been added to Part 3 as a contribution to the field’s ongoing conversation about representations, and understandings, of death in antiquity. At the author’s direction, all the chapters have been newly revisited and re-edited, and in some places brought up to date, in preparation for publication.

A final word, before I let the author speak for himself (as it were). It is one of the pleasures of academic research to read Bettini’s work in Italian, as he is as great a stylist as he is a scholar. I have a very distinct memory of sitting down for the first time with this book, given to me as a gift by a fellow student, and finding myself unable to put it aside. Perhaps because Bettini is also an accomplished author of narrative fiction, his academic writing often reads like a novel, the stories he weaves compelling you to turn page after page. In these pages, Bettini illuminates a world that is, as he reminds us, in many ways similar, but more often very different from our own. In my translation I have tried to capture the newness and excitement of visiting this world through his prose. My wish, therefore—perhaps a coin, and a whisper into the ears of Hermes will grant it—is that he speaks through me without any sense that I have validated that well known Italian caveat of “traduttore, traditore.” If it is Bettini’s own voice that you hear across these pages, I will have succeeded.

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Is it possible for someone forced to learn Latin in four years and under threat of the rod to ever develop lasting affection for classical literature? Not normally—and Samuel Butler was no exception. Having suffered such treatment from an early age, in fact Samuel developed an enduring hatred of the classics. This was not the outcome that his father, the Reverend Thomas Butler, had hoped for when he decided to teach his son the language of Cicero and Virgil, of course. Nor did he have this end in mind when he sent young Samuel away to receive lessons from Professor Kennedy, celebrated professor of classical languages at Shrewsbury. (Describing his experience at the school, the scholar would later write: “You are surrounded on every side by lies.”) Despite his father’s great hopes, however, that is exactly how things turned out. Samuel learned to hate the classics—except for Homer—just as he learned to hate Tennyson, whom his grandfather, the respected Bishop Butler, had revered.

In the course of his life Samuel became a writer and thus had the opportunity to voice many sentiments that others in his position might have felt compelled to keep quiet. In his autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh*, the character Ernest (Samuel’s counterpart) submits an important article for publication in the academic journal edited by his college. In a nutshell, the hypothesis advanced in this article was that Aristophanes, a writer as perceptive as he was outspoken, had given expression to the Athenians’ true feelings
for their dramaturges: disgust. According to Ernest/Samuel, the Greeks fre-
quented the theater in the same spirit as his contemporary Englishmen went
to church: they went because everyone else did, though they were bored to
death by sermons. Apparently, when someone learns to hate something as a
child, that hatred is true and lasting! (As for Tennyson, Samuel was pleased
to discover—and recount—that the poet laureate was actually an avid col-
lector of dirty jokes and quite foul-mouthed . . . in private, naturally).  

Someone who detests Greek theater and compares it to the church in
which his father and grandfather had preached each Sunday morning, is
surely deserving of our confidence—not because his opinions were necessar-
ily correct, but because they were, at the very least, original. In fact, Butler
had a number of idiosyncratic ideas about the classics. The reader will recall,
for example, The Authoress of the Odyssey, a book in which Butler suggested
a solution to the knotty problem of the “differences” between the Iliad and
Odyssey, arguing that the Odyssey had been written by a woman—a decid-
edly unusual proposition, even if Butler was not the first to make it.  
Or, the reader will think of those pages of Erewhon in which Butler describes
the system of education used in that strange (and remarkably postmodern-
ist) country his lively imagination had dreamed up “over the range.” Even
if somewhat disguised, the classics make an appearance there as well:

The main feature in their system is the prominence which they give to a
study which I can only translate by the word “hypothetics.” They argue
thus—that to teach a boy merely the nature of the things which exist in the
world around him, and about which he will have to be conversant during
his whole life, would be giving him but a narrow and shallow conception
of the universe, which it is urged might contain all manner of things which
are not now to be found therein. To open his eyes to these possibilities, and
so to prepare him for all sorts of emergencies, is the object of this system of
hypothetics. To imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies,
and require the youths to give intelligent answers to the questions that
arise therefrom, is reckoned the fittest conceivable way of preparing them
for the actual conduct of their affairs in after life.

Thus they are taught what is called the hypothetical language for many
of their best years—a language which was originally composed at a time
when the country was in a very different state of civilisation to what it is
at present, a state which has long since disappeared and been superseded.

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1. On these aspects of Butler’s biography, see Henderson 1967, 4ff.
2. Butler 1897.
Many valuable maxims and noble thoughts which were at one time concealed in it have become current in their modern literature, and have been translated over and over again into the language now spoken. Surely then it would seem enough that the study of the original language should be confined to the few whose instincts led them naturally to pursue it.

But the Erewhonians think differently; the store they set by this hypothetical language can hardly be believed; they will even give any one a maintenance for life if he attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it; nay, they will spend years in learning to translate some of their own good poetry into the hypothetical language—to do so with fluency being reckoned a distinguishing mark of a scholar and a gentleman.4

No doubt readers are meant to understand “the hypothetical language” as a reference to Latin—the language that Samuel’s father, armed with a rod, began to teach him when he was just four years old. The tone is ironic and surely Butler would have preferred that the inhabitants of Erewhon had devoted the better years of their children’s lives not to “the hypothetical language” but to something more concrete. It is easy to imagine what the author’s judgment would be of “giving a maintenance for life” to anyone who “attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it,” as was the case of Professor Kennedy of the Shrewsbury school. Sometimes hatred serves us better than affection, however, and for this reason we invite the reader to take seriously Butler’s metaphorical invention—the classics as “hypothetics,” a way of opening our eyes to all the possibilities that may be encountered in the universe, including those that do not belong to the here and now.

In my opinion, Butler’s hatred of the classics actually led him to an appropriate way of thinking. Here we may cite the opinion of Michel de Montaigne, as well. Montaigne had learned Latin at an even earlier age than Butler, apparently even before he learned French. In contrast to Butler, however, Montaigne demonstrated throughout his entire life an extraordinary love for the classics. He wrote: “Though I be engaged to one forme, I doe not tie the world unto it, as every man doth. And I beleve and conceive a thousand manners of life.”5 Here is another example of “hypothetics”—imagining and conceiving a thousand other manners of life precisely because, as the Erewhonians would later claim, “to imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies” constitutes the best form of education. The practice of a system of “hypothetics,” or the exercise of continually imagining “a thousand manners of life,” as Montaigne did, helps us to not only

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appreciate the richness of what is possible, but also console ourselves about the anguish of the present (or what everyone believes is the present). For in fact, as the Erewhonians suggested, the universe “might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein.”

I have chosen to begin this book speaking about Butler and his hatred for the classics (and of the use that the Erewhonians made of “hypothetics”) not merely for the pleasure of citation. The fact is that I find myself to some degree sympathetic to his situation (including a certain hostility for teaching Latin in the way that it was taught to Butler). Yet I am even more enthusiastic about the possibility that in modern culture the classics can function precisely as “hypothetics”—in other words, as a starting point for thinking about the “thousand manners of life,” as Montaigne advocated. It is this perspective that I have tried to take in putting together The Ears of Hermes. I am convinced, in fact, that the Greeks and Romans, though in some respects very similar to us, most often conceived things in a much different way than we do, and are able, therefore, to open our eyes to so many “possibilities” of life that otherwise we might not be able to see. The Greek and the Romans told exciting—yet different—stories. They elaborated profound—yet different—symbols. Above all, they confronted problems in many ways similar to those we find ourselves confronting today—e.g., the permanence of memory and the snare of forgetfulness, the perils of identity and the strategies necessary for constructing it, the pretensions of moral absolutes and the relativity of customs, and so on—yet with a different approach, because their worldview and the resources of their culture were different than ours. All these analogies and discrepancies constitute an extraordinary deposit of “hypothetics,” a rich vein of alternate potentialities that the presence of the classics—thanks to the care devoted to them by so many generations of readers and scholars—permits us to continue mining. Why would we not choose to do so?

Certainly not because some of our contemporaries allege that the classics long ago ceased being relevant, and that, in order to be a citizen of the world, it is enough to know English and computer science. And certainly not because others are instead preoccupied with keeping the classics all to themselves, pruning them of all that would render them of interest to modern culture. Perhaps they should remember Erewhon and the fact that the universe “might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein.”
Every god has his own style. Mercury, for example has little wings on his feet. He is a Nepman and a rogue.


Communication has its places—and these are also, or above all, symbolic. Inhabitants of the modern world inevitably tend to associate communication with the telephone, the fax machine, the computer keyboard, the television or the radio. These are undeniably technical, powerful “places”; but most of all, they are places removed from the human body and its topography. The same is true of memory and its counterpart, forgetfulness, two spheres of human experience that are intimately associated with communication. In fact, when we imagine where memory is “located,” our modern experience most often suggests the image of one of the many written and electronic archives that we have amassed. Writing, in other words—along with that deceptive transformation of writing, visual or vocal “recording”—has long held us in its power: for us, even what is spoken becomes “written” once it has been recorded and our fleeting visual experiences—shows, exhibitions, the events we attend—unexpectedly take the form of an archive, a reusable store of information thus resembling a book or document.

Symbolically speaking, as well, our own experience of communication has been dissociated from human physicality and transformed into a kind of “bodiless” communication: ears, tongue and memory (which, along with forgetfulness, is located “somewhere” inside of us) have all ended up outside of us, living an almost autonomous existence. Entrusted to the telephone and to the Internet, communication among human beings has become more and more frequently detached from physical interaction. Even silence—when it occurs!—is no longer a palpable void that surrounds us and muffles conversation: it is the phone line going dead, the television blinking off into noiseless darkness or the computer terminal failing to connect.

But it was not always so.

The Lord of Communication

In the market-square of Pharae in Achaea stood the stone image of a bearded Hermes.2 Before it, an altar, also of stone, was adorned with bronze lamps held in place by lead stays. This statue had prophetic powers and according to Pausanias the ritual prescribed for consulting the god was this:3 if someone wished to ask something of Hermes, he was to come at evening, burn incense on the altar, fill the lamps with oil and light them. Leaving a coin on the altar on the right side of the statue, he was to whisper his question into the god’s ears. He was then to quit the square, holding his hands over his ears. Once outside, he was to remove his hands from his ears, and whatever voice he heard in that instant he was to interpret prophetically.

The Greeks referred to the practice of divination in which words heard on the breeze were attributed predictive value by the term klēdonismos (“divination by means of klēdōn”).4 The word klēdōn (< kleō, “to tell of”) in turn denotes a “sound” or “voice” that someone perceives by chance, an omen in the form of a word or rumor that circulates through the air of its own accord, revealing the will of the gods. Divination by means of oblative signs was not exclusive to Greece, however. Other Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean peoples were also familiar with this practice; it was long practiced in the folkloric traditions of Europe, for example.5 The Romans, for their part, held vocal omen in great esteem, considering them equally prophetic as voices caught out of thin air—candid, involuntary phrases that contained

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5. On the Mesopotamian egirrá, see Bottéro 1974.
a profound and often crucial message for the person to whom they were addressed.6

In all such cases, it was simply a question of knowing how to recognize the supernatural significance of such voices—how to apprehend and then interpret these “words.” Crassus, for example, failed to understand that the man on the quay of the port of Brundisium hawking Caunian figs by yelling “Cauneas!” was not simply advertising his goods. The fig seller was actually warning him not to take a sea voyage to his own death by shouting cau’ n(e) eae (“do not go!”), using the apocopated pronunciation of the imperative cave (“beware lest . . . ”) characteristic of the spoken language.7 Crassus’ mistake, to his misfortune, was that he did not expect a prophecy in this form. In the case of Hermes at Pharae, of course, it was impossible to be caught off guard: the faithful petitioner paid money to consult the oracle; he whispered a specific question in the god’s ear and knew precisely at what moment the klēdōn would come to him.

Looking more closely at the god involved in klēdonismos at Pharae, it appears that Hermes was involved in divination by means of “voices” also outside of this particular context. A phallic herm from Pithanes in Aeolis, for example, bears the inscription Hermēs Klēdonios.8 Hermes’ function as the disseminator of fortuitous messages is not surprising. As the god of chance discovery, anything that anyone happened upon by accident could be referred to in Greek as “a gift of Hermes” (hermaion),9 and Hermes also played a role in the ancient practice of casting lots, where meaningful “randomness” was of central importance.10 It is all the more understandable, then, that the market square—the realm of Hermes—was used as a place in which to receive prophetic klēdones: the market was naturally filled with people speaking and shouting, and Greeks generally appear to have paid much attention to sumbola there.11 The market square was in fact a place of exchange and encounter in every respect, corresponding fully to the nature of Hermes, god of the market, passages, open spaces, exchange and commerce.12

6. For the etymology of omen, see Benveniste 1962, 10ff. On the divinatory characteristics of the vocal omen, see Bouché-Leclercq 1882, IV, 77ff. and Bloch 1963, 79ff.
7. This famous case is reported by Cic. Div. 2.84. For the phonetics, see Hofmann 1936.
9. Cf., e.g., Soph. Ant. 397; Plat. Phaed. 107c; Sym. 176c; Gorg. 486e, etc. Brown 1990, 39ff. interprets this expression as a vestige of the practice of “silent trade” known elsewhere in ancient Greece—a type of exchange practiced in absentia, in which one of the two partners leaves an object in a certain place, the other coming to collect it later, leaving his payment in its place.
11. Cf. the fragment of the comic poet Philemon cited by Clem. Alex. Strom. 7.4.25 (= Poet. Com. Graec. fr. 100 Kassel-Austin), and see Halliday 1967, 230 n. 2.
12. See the discussion of Vernant 1965c. For an original prospective on how Hermes’ “space”
Hermes, in short, was the god of circulation and everything circulated around him: coins, prophetic signs, merchandise, encounters, klédones. In Greek religious thought, Hermes might be said to represent what today we might define more prosaically by the term “communication”: He was the herald (kērux) and messenger (angelos), functioning as a kind of channel for communication between the transmitter and addressee of a certain message. Accustomed as we are to carrying telephones in our pockets, we easily forget that in antiquity such methods of long-distance communication corresponded to the figure of the angelos, the kērux, the nuntius and the orator. Hermes was the religious representation of all this.

As the god of communication, a specific and—from our point of view—significant part of the body was sacred to Hermes in antiquity: the tongue. As the philosopher Cornutus (Comp. p. 21) says, Hermes “is called the messenger (diaktoros) because . . . he leads (diagein) our thoughts to the souls (psuchai) of those near us: for this reason, they consecrate the tongue to him.” This unambiguously religious association of Hermes with the organ of vocal articulation places the god squarely in the camp of one of the most fundamental aspects of human interaction: linguistic communication. Plato sustains that Hermes “has to do with language (logos)” and that for this reason he should be called “Eiremes,” from eirein (“to say”). In Hesiod, we find the story of how Hermes endowed Pandora with “lies, devious speech, a mischievous nature” and above all “a voice.” The Roman scholar Macrobius described Mercury as “in control of the voice and, indeed, of speech” (vocis et sermonis potenter).

From this perspective, it is interesting to note that for Cornutus Hermes literally was “the word” (logos), and all his other attributes derive from this fundamental characteristic. We have already seen Hermes diaktoros functioning as a kind of linguistic vector. His “penetrating” and “perspicuous” nature is also emphasized, as well as his “swiftness in vocal articulation”—the same features that characterize effective linguistic communication. In Cornutus’ interpretation, linguistic exchange dominates all of Hermes’ other roles: he is the “herald” (kērux) because “by means of a sonorous voice (phōnē) all that is signified through language reaches the ears” and the “messenger”

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is developing in contemporary culture and society, see Guastella 1997, 1ff.

Chapter 1. Hermes’ Ears

(angelos) because “we know the will of the gods from the meanings (ennoiai) that are brought to us through language.” Even Hermes’ most customary attribute—his winged shoes—refers to language, since this “accords with the fact that words are said to be ‘winged’ (pteroenta).” Hermes, then, is the religious category of “conversation” in all its forms.

Aelian also considered Hermes the father of language, but because his work concerned the nature of animals, he considered it worth mentioning what animal most directly represented (the Egyptian) Hermes in his linguistic function: the ibis. Aelian remarks that this bird, which was particularly dear to the god, “resembles the nature of language in its appearance (eidos): its black feathers can be compared to a kind of silent language directed inwards; its white feathers, to language that is directed outwards and heard by others, like a kind of servant and messenger of what exists inside.”

Language, like Hermes, is a messenger: its function is to bring “inside” and “outside” into communication. However, the ibis’ feathers neatly characterize language not only because they represent the human communicative faculty as the vector of some hidden “inner world.” The image of its black and white plumage also captures the notion that language has a “black” and a “white” side—that silence and introversion are just as much a part of language as articulated speech.

Aelian speaks of “black” and “white” feathers, but the analogy between the ibis and language is not limited to its plumage. Aristotle mentioned a popular belief that “crows and ibises join in sexual union with the mouth, and among quadrupeds the weasel gives birth through its mouth. Anaxagoras says this, as well as some other natural philosophers, but he discusses it only very superficially and without reflection.”

Aelian also discusses the belief that the ibis performs coitus orally, adding that this bird not only conceives but also gives birth through the mouth. In this, the ibis resembles the weasel, which was traditionally believed to give birth through the mouth and to which some sources attribute the corresponding ability to conceive through the ears.

In view of the analogy between the weasel and the ibis as animals that “give birth through the mouth,” it is interesting to note that Plutarch also discusses the weasel as a symbol of language. Explaining why the Egyptians venerated the asp, the weasel and the scarab, he notes that “many believe that

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19. Ael. Nat. anim. 10.28. These beliefs probably relate to the Egyptian god Theuth, identified with Hermes, to whom the ibis was sacred (cf. Plat. Phaedr. 274c). Hermes/Theuth was considered the inventor of the letters of the alphabet; see below.


21. Ael. Nat. anim. 10.28

22. Cf. Ant. Lib. Met. 29; Plut. Is. Os. 74.381a; Physiologus 21; Isid. Etym. 12.3.3, etc.
the weasel conceives through the ears and gives birth through its mouth and that this is an image of the origin of language.” Language has its origin in the mouth and ears: in this sense, the weasel, whose reproductive cycle goes “from mouth to ear,” is an excellent representation of this human phenomenon. We do not know if the ibis belonged to the realm of speech because of its reproductive habits: Aelian only mentions the color of its feathers. The close association of this bird with language appears to be reinforced, however, by similar beliefs about the weasel.

The symbolic role that birds play in connection with Hermes as the god of language is worth exploring. As the conveyer of spoken language and guide of the flow of words from tongue to ears, Hermes was believed also to have invented the letters of the alphabet and revealed to men how to capture “flighty” vocal expressions in fixed signs. In one of his mythographic resumés, Hyginus recounts how the idea of the alphabet occurred to the god: “Some say that it was Mercury [who invented letters], from the flight of cranes, which when they fly express the letters of the alphabet” (alii dicunt Mercurium ex gruum volatu, quae cum volant litteras exprimunt). Dante resorted to a similar comparison in describing the wailing host of lecherous men that approached him as cranes that fly “forming long lines in the air.”

The flight of the crane is graphical, then, just as the ibis’ plumage is oral. The ibis’ oral character manifests itself in a system of simple oppositions: black/white, speech/silence. The crane’s “graphicness,” however, depends on a rather more complex articulation of the wings and the body, which together are capable of forming the set of graphemes necessary for writing. It is only a mythographic fantasy, of course, that the flight of birds put the idea of litterae into men’s minds. This fantasy, moreover, was possible only when the concept of writing so pervaded the world of mental representations that even the manner in which birds fly could be imagined as “alphabetic”: men looked to the sky and there too observed lines of writing.

The notion that avian flight patterns could function as a written code was probably also suggested by the divinatory practice of “reading” such patterns. If birds were capable of transmitting signa in their features and through the patterns they made in the sky, why could this not also function as a true and proper alphabet? This idea—that the flight of birds was able to inscribe “winged words”—represents a striking paradox: “wings,” like those

of Hermes’ sandals, both carry words away and fix them permanently in writing. But Hermes, god of language and communication, is always there.

Focusing on the ritual at Pharae again, one thing in particular strikes our attention: the consistency with which a certain symbolic value is assigned to a part of the body that functions as a kind of complement to the tongue—that is, to the ears. The petitioner poses his question by whispering directly into the god’s ear, while he protects himself from receiving false or useless omens by covering his ears with his hands. He chooses the right moment for receiving the kłédōn by then freeing his hands from them. Hermes, god of the tongue, thus takes on another role as god of the ears. Perhaps not coincidentally, Hermes could be represented in the act of “covering his ears” with his hands:27 Apollo besets Hermes with accusations and in response, the child-god utters two typical acoustic “omens” (oiōnoi): he burps loudly and sneezes.28 “By dint of such omens,” Apollo declares, he will surely find his stolen cows—and it will be Hermes to show him the way. Hermes then leaps to his feet and runs off, “covering his ears”—precisely the same sequence of gestures that the petitioner at Pharae performs when he takes his leave of the god’s statue. Another aspect of the cult of Hermes refers to his ears and their communicative function: At Athens, there was a statue dedicated to Hermes Psithuristēs, “The Whisperer.”29 According to Pausanias,30 Hermes received this epithet “because men who gather there hold secret discourses and whisper to each other whatever they want to say.”31 Hermes could be represented explicitly as the god of whispering—i.e., “speaking in the ear”—thus receiving in the form of an epithet what the petitioner at Pharae addressed to him in practice.

Hermes’ relationship with “ears” fits his role as the god of language, since communication can only occur, as the French proverb goes, de la bouche à l’oreille: both organs are necessarily to the process.32 Plutarch’s symbolism of the weasel demonstrates this neatly; he also asserts that the ears of gossip-mongers “do not communicate with the soul, but with the tongue. For this

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27. Hom. Hymn. in Merc. 305ff. The text is difficult to interpret, however: see the note in Cassola 1975, 532ff.
31. Cf. Eust. ad Hom. Od. 20.8; Usener 1948, 267 n. 5. For Brown 1990, 14ff., Hermes’ “whisper” relates to the god’s characteristic magical abilities (in magic, the whisper has an important role).
32. In Mesopotamian culture, the ears were considered the site of intellectual progress: cf. the “divinations with four ears” discussed by Bottéro 1982, 131.
Part 1. Mythology

reason, the words that most people are able to hold on to when they hear them, gossipmongers let slip away.” The mouth and the ears are so closely connected that the god who oversees communication necessarily deals with both.

Linguistic acts do not, however, consist solely in the emission of sound and auditory reception (As a symbol of language the weasel thus represents an ideal interpretation of communication): beyond speaking and listening, understanding and interpreting messages are also necessary components of the process of communication. These also fell within the purview of Hermes. Again according to Cornutus, the fact that Hermes’ mother was named Maia was supposed to mean that “the word (logos) is the foundation of speculation (theōria) and research (zētēsis).” In fact, wet-nurses are called maiai because they bring babies into the light, just as happens in an investigation (ereuna).” Hermes, then, was also the god of research and investigation.

Beyond Cornutus’ speculations, it is interesting that Hermes’ own name was connected with words such as hermēneus, hermēneia, and hermēneuein, which all refer to interpretation and translation from one language to another. As the god of interpretation and translation, Hermes established communication not only in commercial exchange, but also when translating from one language or culture to another. The same relationship between commercial and linguistic mediation is captured by the Latin term interpres, which properly referred to the mediator of business transactions; an interpres was the person who established a “price” (-pres) “between” (inter-) two parties. The linguistic “interpreter” was thus equivalent to the mediating figure that assisted two parties in concluding commercial transactions by negotiating a price.

Hermes’ function at Pharae can be reconsidered within the perspective of the relationship between translation and the world of the market, as well. Through the “voices” and “sounds” of the market, Hermes established communication between men and gods (or more exactly, between men and their destiny). Translating Fate into a klēdōn, he allowed men to understand the obscure will of the gods and, in doing so, achieved what was perhaps the most difficult type of communication. As Cicero says, when the gods speak


34. Corn. Comp. p. 23.


to us and we are not able to understand them, they are like “Carthaginians or Spaniards that come to speak to us in the Senate without an interpreter” (*Poeni aut Hispani in senatu nostro loquerentur sine interprete*). They speak a foreign language, in other words—and Hermes, god of mediation, has to translate.

Hermes stands at the very center of discourse. The entire process of communication—speaking and hearing, the mouth and the ear—constellates around him. Above all, he is at the center of the most delicate part of the linguistic operation: interpretation. To use Aelian’s imagery, Hermes has the ability to turn the ibis’ black feathers white, to make explicit what was implicit, and to bring “out” what might otherwise have remained “in.” It is perhaps surprising, then, to see Hermes implicated in a moment that seems, at least at first glance, to involve the opposite of spoken discourse: the moment, that is, when linguistic communication fails just as it has begun.

**Hermes Is in the Building**

The Messenger arrived unexpectedly. In the commotion of the wedding feast, he appeared like any of the others among the crowd of guests, and so the drinkers failed to notice the god’s mysterious entrance. Hugging his divinity close like a drenched cloak, he blended into the throng of revelers as he passed:

. . . Aber plötzlich sah
mitten im Sprechen einer von den Gästen
den jungen Hausherrn oben an dem Tische
wie in die Höh gerissen, nicht mehr liegend,
und überall und mit dem ganzen Wesen
ein Fremdes spiegelnd, das ihn furchtbar ansprach.
Und gleich darauf, als klärte sich die Mischung,
war Stille; nur mit einem Satz am Boden
von trübem Lärm und einem Niederschlag
fallenden Lallens, schon verdorben riechend
nach dumpfem umgestandenem Gelächter.
Und da erkannten sie den schlanken Gott,
und wie er dastand . . .

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37. Cic. *Div.* 2.131. It is interesting that among the names (and functions) of the Mesopotamian divinity was also that of “interpreter”: cf. Bottéro 1982, 114.
Part 1. Mythology

But suddenly
one of the guests, among the conversations
saw the young master of the house at the head of the table
as if, no longer lying there, he had risen up on high
and all about and with all his being
mirrored something strange and frightening that spoke to him.
And as soon as the confusion had cleared,
was there silence; with only the remains on the ground
of a gloomy din and an echo
of dying murmurs, already tainted
that stank of deaf laughter restrained.
And then he recognized the swift god,
and how he stood . . .

This is the marriage feast of Admetus, and Hermes the Messenger has entered
the room to announce to the young groom that he must die. When? At once.
The god’s entrance was discreet, but his appearance was no less frightening
for that. What is most striking in Rilke’s lines, in fact, is the perfect
coincidence of the god’s epiphany and the sudden descent of silence upon
the room. The change that has come over Admetus (who already makes his
way out the banquet as if enchanted by “something strange and frightening
that spoke to him”) is noticed by one the guests “among the conversations”
that echo throughout the room. When the confusion clears, a great silence
predominates (“und bald . . . war Stille”), which the echo of dying laughter
and confused murmurs only makes more oppressive. Now Hermes is there
and everyone knows it.

In constructing the opening of his celebrated Alkestis, it is hard to imag-
ine that Rilke did not have in mind Plutarch’s assertion that “when in some
gathering silence suddenly descends, they say that Hermes has entered the
room.”38 The modern poet has written a work of poetry that is objectively
Greek and a Plutarchean proverb, dramatized in the form of a story, gives
Admetus’ German wedding its tragic atmosphere. There is nothing forced
in any of this, though. Greeks or no Greeks, it is distressing when, for no
apparent reason, conversation fails and silence descends upon a group of
people who previously had been engaged in lively chatter. It is as if the
unexpected break in conversation suggested the entrance of the supernatural.
The total synchrony of events, perhaps, creates the suspicion that “something
strange” has insinuated itself among us. Even today in France, Germany and
England people commonly declare in similar situations that “an angel has

Chapter 1. Hermes’ Ears

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passed”;} in Christian culture, the messenger of the Lord assumes the role of Hermes, the winged messenger, but the substance has not changed. The winged Christian angel conveys a silence of equal foreboding.

In ancient Rome, sudden silences at banquets were considered ominous: “It has been remarked,” Pliny writes, “that the participants at a feast may suddenly fall silent, but only if the banqueters are of an even number. In such circumstances, everyone’s reputation is at risk” (Connected as they are with chthonic deities, even numbers are inauspicious). Pliny relates this “sudden silence” to the fact that somewhere someone is “speaking badly” of the guests (isque famae labor est), almost as if a malevolent voice besmirching the good reputation of the guests possessed the strange power of being able to halt conversation from afar.

Rilke was a master of supernatural silences. By the time dessert was served at Urnekloster’s dinner, for example, the ghost of Cristina Brahe had “crossed through the room already deserted . . . through an indescribable silence, in which was only heard the tinkling of a glass” (“durch den nun freigewordenen Raum vorüberging . . . durch unbeschreibliche Stille, in der nur irgendwo ein Glas zitternd klirrte”). Here, too, a trace of sound—a tinkling like the muffled murmurs in Alkestis—only makes the silence more terrifying:

“Wer ist das?” schrie mein Vater dazwischen.
“Jemand, der wohl das Recht hat, hier zu sein. Keine Fremde. Christine Brahe.”—Da entstand wieder jene merkwürdig dünne Stille, und wieder fing das Glas an zu zittern.

“Who is it?” shouted my father, interrupting my grandfather.
“Someone who has every right to be here. Not a stranger. Christine Brahe.” Then that strange silence returned and the glass began to tremble again.

Silence is a mark of the dead. In the afterlife, no one speaks, and anyone of that realm—Hermes, an angel of the Lord, the ghost of Cristina Brahe—necessarily causes conversation to fail. In fact, death itself is absolute silence: this is why Hermes, represented as the psuchopompos (“escort of

39. On the folkloric beliefs concerning “sudden silences,” see Wolters 1935, 95; Deonna and Renard 1994, 110ff. Frazer 1911, II, 299) records that in Bavaria at the moment in which conversation fails there is the custom of saying, “Someone has crossed their legs.”
40. Plin. Nat. hist. 28.27.
41. See Deonna and Renard 1994, 120.
42. The passage is difficult to interpret. According to Wolters 1935, 93ff., sudden silence was believed to signal the arrival of hostile demons. See also Deonna and Renard 1994, 119.
radiates the silence characteristic of the world beyond. If Hermes is in the building, gloomy quiet prevails, just as conversation that takes place between and with the gods is by definition silent.

This consideration only partially explains Plutarch’s proverb (The meaning of a proverb is always richer and fuller than the explanation some unilateral interpretation provides). The complexity of Hermes’ own nature—as the god of voices, the tongue, the ears and linguistic communication in general—permits a better understanding of the meaning of the silence provoked by the god’s unexpected arrival. The fact is that Hermes, the lord of all communication, controls both speech and silence: to use Aelian’s metaphor, both the ibis’ white and black feathers are in his power. In fact, when Macrobius described Mercury as “in control of the voice and speech,” he must also have meant to refer to his power over silence—to his ability not to grant the voice or speech.

Speaking aloud and remaining silent are two faces of the same coin, and Hermes displays them both. This is why Hermes, as the god of thieves, makes dogs fall silent at the dark of night, truly behaving as the “Dog Strangler” (kunanchēs), as his epithet indicates. Hermes had demonstrated this ability at the very beginning of his career, when, as a child, he stole Apollo’s cows. The little thief reentered his mother’s cave “without the dogs barking”; nor “did he make any sound as normally happens when touching the ground.” Hermes “had launched upon the dogs that guarded them an attack of lethargy and kunanchē.” The kunanchē that Hermes inflicts upon the dogs is a kind of “sore throat” that keeps them from barking, as if strangled. In other words, just as it lies in Hermes’ power to grant the capacity to speak, so too he can take it away.

43. Deonna and Renard 1994, 120ff.
44. Cic. Div. 1.129 observed that “the spiritual faculties (animi) of the gods perceive reciprocally without eyes, ears or tongue that which each experiences (for which reason, men, even when the express a desire or a wish in silence, do not doubt that the gods here them). See Scarpi 1983, 31–50, esp. 36.
45. Hipponax fr. 2.1 Degani, with a rich apparatus of further evidence. On the dog in Greek culture, see Franco 2000.
47. Similar is the “silence” and “deafness” that the small thief asks of the old man who has seen him pass by Apollo’s cows: “having heard me, be deaf, and say not a word” (92ff.). The text also alludes to the conspiratorial behavior of the thief: “I did not see, I know nothing, I did not hear others speak of it; I could not tell you” (263ff.).
49. Kunanchē is a term used to indicate a disease of the throat characteristic of dogs (Arist. Anim. 604a; Ael. Nat. animal. 4.40) as well as angina in human beings (Corp. Hipp. 2.7.16 Littré, etc.).
Chapter 1. Hermes’ Ears

Lupus in Fabula

Let us follow this thematic thread. In Latin, a specific expression was used to indicate the unexpected arrival of someone in the middle of a conversation about that very person: *lupus in fabula* (“the wolf in the tale”). The grammarian Pompeius explains: “You are speaking about someone and this person suddenly shows up. You say: *lupus in fabula.*” This expression has many parallels in both ancient and modern languages, and these too often involve the “wolf”: in Greek, there was “If you only mention the wolf . . . ,” with the same meaning as *lupus in fabula,* while medieval Europe knew the saying *mentio si fiet, saepe lupus veniet.* An adage known in Tuscany is “chi ha il lupo in bocca, l’ha sulla groppa” (“who has the wolf in his mouth, has it on his back”), while in France it is “quand on parle du loup, on en voit la queue” and in Germany, “wenn man den Wolf nennt, so kommt er gerennt.”

These expressions correspond to the traditional prescription never to name malicious or dangerous beings in order to avoid their sudden appearance. Similar proverbs have the devil in the role of the wolf: cf. “speak of the devil, and horns will sprout.” In Spain, the wolf or devil appears to be substituted by another, equally malevolent figure in the proverbial saying, “en nombrando el ruin de Roma, luego asoma.” This is similar to the Italian “persona trista, nominata e vista,” while in China a figure known as General Cao Cao fulfills this function in the proverb “shuo Caocao, Caocao jiu dao” (“when you speak of Cao Cao, he comes immediately”). From this comparative evidence, we may infer that at Rome the expression *lupus in fabula* was employed to mean that the person who suddenly appeared had actually been summoned into the conversation simply by naming them. This was

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53. Walter 1964, n. 14777. With small stylistic differences, the same proverb recurs also in n. 8628, 23503, 27174 and 30312.

54. Arthaber 1989, 364ff. In modern Greek, there is also the proverb *kata phonē kai bo gaidaros,* in which “the donkey” (*bo gaidaros*) replaces “the wolf.”


56. For the “ruin de Roma,” see Arthaber 1989, 364ff. “Ruin” means “wretch, trickster, crafty old devil,” etc. For the etymology of this expression and its most ancient evidence (also proverbial), see Corominas 1954, 4, 86ff. For the Chinese proverb, see Mathews 1972, 884: Cao Cao was a powerful general of the 2nd c. ce who, in later traditions, became the incarnation of evil itself.
most likely the origin of the proverb, though this observation merits greater amplification.

All these beliefs and proverbs presume the curious notion that simply speaking about someone actually involves them in conversation (if only partially and imperfectly). Something similar occurs in the *Iliad*, when, returning from their celebrated “Night Raid,” Odysseus and Diomedes appear in the Achaean camp at the precise moment that Nestor had been speaking of them: “The conversation was not but finished, and already they had arrived.”57 The notion that speaking about someone effectively brings about the appearance of that individual is clear in the Roman belief we have already cited above from Pliny: evidently, the sudden onset of silence was attributed to the fact that, somewhere, someone was slandering those sitting at the banquet (*isque famae labor est*).

In these circumstances, the person who constitutes the topic of conversation is obviously outside the conversation. Nevertheless, he or she perceives what is happening in the distant conversation by means of the silence that occurs within the present (that is, in-progress) conversation in which he or she is currently involved. It is almost as if the “present” conversation were being interrupted by a “distant” conversation in which one of the (present) participants has become the (distant) subject of conversation. This interruption, however, is not the same as entering into another circle of communication: the person being spoken about in the “distant” conversation simply stops communicating with his or her interlocutors in the “present” conversation, without actually entering into communication with those who are speaking about him.

Pliny records another Roman belief that seems to suggest the same thing: “it is commonly held that people can perceive when they are being talked about by others by a ringing in their ears” (*quin et absentes tinnitut aurium praesentire sermones de se receptum est*).58 This belief still circulates in some modern societies in proverbial form, although the Roman “ringing” has been substituted by “buzzing” or “humming.”59 Here, the individual who is the (distant) topic of conversation senses a kind of disturbance in their

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57. Hom. *Il.* 10.540. This comparison was made by Erasmus (*Ad.* 2.5.50).
59. Statements of the type “orecchia manca, parola franca; orecchia destra, parola mal detta” (in Zeppini Bolelli 1989, 122), implying that either the right or the left ear buzzes depending on whether the person is being spoken of “well” or “badly,” are already ancient: see Wolters 1935, 49 and Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (V, XXIII, 6) in Wilkin 1852, II, 82: “When our cheek burneth or ear tingleth, we usually say that somebody is talking of us. . . . Which is a conceit hardly to be made out without the concession of a signifying genius, or universal Mercury, conducting sounds unto their distant subjects, and teaching us to hear by touch.”
own (present) communication, as if they had somehow been attracted into a conversation in which they cannot, however, fully participate. Thus they perceive only a vague sensation of that remote discourse.

In such cases, we might say that only the phatic function of communication has been activated: the “ringing” or “buzzing” signals that a channel of communication with another conversation has opened, but no effective message can be transmitted along this channel. Nevertheless, speaking about someone distant seems to produce a kind of sympathy with them. In some way, this act draws them into the present conversation, as in the case of lupus in fabula—even if in this instance the attraction towards the conversation in progress is so strong that the person does actually appear.

Let us try, then, to disentangle the cultural web of which lupus in fabula is only the first strand. Behind it, there is not only the belief that, once named, a malignant creature (the wolf, the devil) suddenly appears, but also the more general conviction that speaking about someone establishes a kind of sympathetic relationship with that person, and that even if they do not appear, nevertheless they perceive their role as the topic of conversation. These cultural models form the foundation of lupus in fabula.

The origin of a proverb is one thing; its manner of signification is another. A proverb is in fact a refined semiotic mechanism, whose operation may be schematized as follows: the proverb expresses a certain (“logical” or “real”) situation, which is invariable, through a set of images, which may vary infinitely; for example, as Greimas notes, the situation “act before it is too late” may be expressed through the set of images that includes expressions such as “strike while the iron is hot” (Europe), “shape the chalk while it is soft” (Swahili) and “cook the gourd while the fire is hot” (ancient Hebrew). In the case of lupus in fabula, the situation that is being expressed is “the person about whom we have been speaking has just arrived,” while the set of images used to express this situation includes the arrival of the wolf, the devil, the ruin de Roma, the persona trista and so on. To begin our analysis of lupus in fabula, therefore, we will look at the (variable and varied) images used to express it, rather than dwelling upon the (invariable) situation expressed by the proverb. And this set of images prompts an immediate

61. I use the categories of Permiakov 1979, 163–79. Greimas (1974, 325) attributes a similar semiotic function to the proverb when he insisted on the “connotative” character of proverbial language, meaning by this “the transfer of meaning from one semantic place (that intended by the signifier) to another.”
question: When the person about whom we have been speaking suddenly appears, why do we consider this situation so disturbing that we express it through the image of a wolf or the devil?

Another Tuscan proverb that is still in use today to mean that the person who suddenly appears was just “on the tongue” of the interlocutors, appears to employ a slightly less troubling image: “se eri un fico, eri in bocca” (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”). The image should not mislead us, though; the proverb actually sets up the poor person who suddenly appears on the scene as about to be “eaten” by the speakers. Here, then, it is not the person who is being spoken about that inspires fear, but the interlocutors themselves.

The two types of proverb that we have now seen—one that assimilates the person being spoken about to a wolf or the devil, and one that likens him to a fig in the mouth of the interlocutors—appear to function symmetrically. The situation remains unchanged, but the images used to express that situation orient its meaning in opposite directions. In the first case, the speakers are threatened by the unexpected arrival of the person they have been speaking about, while in the second, the person who has been the subject of conversation finds himself at the mercy of those who have been speaking about him. But why should this specific situation be the cause of so much anxiety that it comes to be expressed proverbially through such unsettling images?

To answer this question, let us consider the connection between *lupus in fabula* and the theme of “unexpected silence.” When the person being spoken about actually appears, it is clear that dialogue cannot continue as before; it must in some sense be interrupted. Commenting on a passage of Terence in which the expression *lupus in fabula* appears, the grammarian Aelius Donatus suggests an interesting linkage between this situation and sudden silences:

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seen the wolf.” This occurs to those whom the wolf sees first, that they are left without words and without voice in the middle of a thought.

According to Donatus, *lupus in fabula* relates to a belief that the wolf, coming upon someone unexpectedly, robs them of their ability to speak. The wolf, then, is capable of producing “sudden silence” in the same way Hermes’ entrance into a room does. Here, however, the fearsome, disturbing creature that causes silence is not a god but an animal, and—significantly—this animal’s power to bring about silences resides in its gaze. That is, if a wolf furtively casts his glance upon someone, that person will be unable to express whatever it is that they had in mind at that moment.

Again, the situation presupposed by *lupus in fabula* always remains the same—“the person we were talking about has arrived”—but the range of images used metaphorically to express this situation has increased. According to Aelius Donatus’ explanation, the sudden arrival of the person being spoken of interrupts the conversation at its middle by depriving the speaker of his voice, as if he were under the spell of the wolf’s bewitching gaze. Scholars have normally rejected this interpretation of the proverb in favor of one based on the prohibition of naming the wolf or the devil in order to prevent its appearance. There is no need to choose one or the other, however. As a creation of folklore, a proverb is capable of sustaining the coexistence of diverse models of belief in its imagery. Donatus’ explanation expands the set of images used by the proverb and, in doing so, further clarifies its meaning. By referring to the enchanting powers of the wolf to rob someone of their voice, *lupus in fabula* is capable of expressing the belief not only that the spoken-of person appears at the sound of his name, but also that his appearance brings silence down upon the interlocutors. The full sense of the proverb encapsulates both meanings: “If you speak of the wolf, the wolf appears and takes away your voice,” and this is a figurative way of saying, “we are speaking about someone, and when they appear we must be quiet.” At any rate, rejecting Donatus’ explanation out of hand is untenable for another reason: the ancient sources concur in their appeal to the theme of the wolf’s gaze to explain the proverb’s origin.

Donatus’ interpretation of *lupus in fabula* only reinforces the disconcerting nature of the images used to express this situation. Arriving on the

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64. Cf., e.g., Plin. *Nat. hist.* 8.80; Hor. *Carm.* 3.27.3; Serv. ad Ecl. 9.53 On this, see Otto 1890, 200ff. and Valenti Pagnini 1981, 5. Pitrè (1889, 463) records a Sicilian expression “lu vitti lu lupu” or “lu ciarmau lu lupu” referring to “someone hoarse.”

scene, the person being spoken of not only acts like the wolf (i.e., appearing when named), but also possesses a kind of bewitching gaze that robs the speaker of his or her voice. Relating this proverb to beliefs about the wolf’s gaze, Servius makes this connection explicit: “The natural philosophers also confirm that the voice is robbed from whomever it [sc. the wolf] has seen first. From this comes the proverb *lupus in fabula*, which is used whenever the person being spoken of arrives and by his presence cuts off the ability to speak” (*etiam physici confirmat, quod vox detrabitur ei, qui primum viderit. unde etiam proverbium natum est ‘lupus in fabula,’ quotiens supervenit ille, de quo loquimur, et nobis sui praesentia amputat facultatem loquendi*).\(^{66}\) Appearing in the middle of a conversation of which he has been the subject, the intruder—like the wolf’s gaze—terminates all communication on the spot. From this we may conclude that *lupus in fabula* presupposes a situation in which the spoken-of person sees the interlocutors first, catching them in the act of speaking about him. It is almost as if he was already there; perhaps he has heard what was being said about him. Because the interlocutors cannot know how much the interloper has heard, they are in a position of weakness. This is the first reason for the disturbing character of this communicative situation.

Upon the interloper’s arrival, conversation must end; otherwise embarrassment ensues. The interlocutors are compelled to be quiet and to interrupt the conversation even in mid-word, if necessary. From this perspective, the situation of *lupus in fabula* partly resembles that of aposiopesis or *reticentia*.\(^{67}\) As for the concrete progression of this interruption, however, *lupus in fabula* seems to offer two possibilities:

- a) Silence falls spontaneously, as if the wolf had seen the interlocutors first;
- b) Silence does not fall spontaneously, and then, to revive the conversation, the proverb is recited.

Donatus identifies an interesting aspect of the proverb in this regard,

\(^{66}\) Serv. ad Ecl. 9.54.

\(^{67}\) Aposiopesis involves the interruption of a phrase already begun and the onset of a silence or pause. There are differences, however: while the silence introduced by aposiopesis presupposes the presence of some kind of internal block (intense emotion, fear of breaking the rules of social control, etc.), the silence of *lupus in fabula* assumes the existence of an external block (the person who appears). Moreover, aposiopesis does not strictly interrupt communication, as it may first appear: rather, it maintains and in fact intensifies communication by recourse to the instrument of silence. *Lupus in fabula*, on the other hand, is a true (and not rhetorical) interruption of the dialogue. On the linguistic, rhetorical, and anthropological function of aposiopesis, see the excellent study of Ricottilli 1984, 13–45.
when he remarks that *lupus in fabula* contains an explicit and immediate “assertion of silence” (*indictio silentii*). The grammarian seems to mean that if silence descends upon the interlocutors at the precise moment in which the interloper appears, it is the proverb itself—pronounced by one of the interlocutors as an “assertion of silence”—that interrupts the conversation. The proverb expresses two things, then: first, what normally happens when the interloper appears and the conversation is interrupted, and second, what must occur when that person arrives. Thus, in addition to its regular descriptive function, *lupus in fabula* also has a performative function.

Not only this. Beyond encapsulating both the statement “silence has descended upon us, because the person we were speaking about has arrived,” *lupus in fabula* has a third dimension of meaning: it also indicates its place in the dialogue. At least in theory, *lupus in fabula* should always be last in a conversation, since its utterance prohibits a response: if the interlocutor responds, he violates the “assertion of silence” that the proverb represents. *Lupus in fabula*, then, necessarily marks the end of one dialogue and the beginning of another—one that involves the newly arrived individual. One further observation. Used in this way, it is obvious that the expression *lupus in fabula* cannot be addressed to the person who was the subject of conversation. If it is the last utterance that the interlocutors exchange in their present dialogue, by necessity it cannot involve the person whose arrival signals the beginning of a new conversation.

Let us now explore the other dimension of the proverb, the image of the fig in the speaker’s mouth. On first consideration, it does not appear that the mere utterance of this expression produces silence, as *lupus in fabula* does. In fact, the situation it defines is quite different. While *lupus in fabula* is the closing utterance of the old dialogue, “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” is the opening statement of the new one. Its utterance effectively transforms the interloper into a full-fledged participant of the conversation. As we have said, these two proverbs thus work in complementary fashion: *lupus in fabula* functions as an “assertion of silence” and an effective interruption of conversation, while “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” functions as an explicit opening of dialogue. Unlike *lupus in fabula*, which cannot be addressed to the newly arrived individual, “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” must be.

Addressing one’s self directly to the new arrival and openly declaring that not moments ago they had been the very topic of conversation naturally presumes great psychological self-assuredness on the part of the interlocutors. In effect, the proverb communicates the following information to the interloper: “We have seen you and we are so sure of our own situation that
we have no difficulty in telling you that we have just been talking about you.” The new arrival may justifiably worry, then: “What could these people have been saying about me? There is nothing to be done about it—whatever they say, I will never know if that is truly what they were saying. I am totally in their hands; in fact, I am in their mouths: ‘if I were a fig, they would be eating me.’”

Both lupus in fabula and the situation typified by the proverbial expression “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” presuppose a rather curious game between the interlocutors and the person who has been the subject of conversation. As we have seen, this game involves the give and take of gazes, and everything depends on who spots whom first. Its true complexity, moreover, emerges from the density of animal beliefs that furnishes the proverb with its set of images. Isidore of Seville describes what happens in each case: “Concerning the wolf, peasants say that a man loses his voice, if the wolf sees him first. For this reason, when someone suddenly falls silent, we say lupus in fabula. On the other hand, if we realize that we have been seen, the wolf loses its bravery and ferocity.” In other words, while the effect of the wolf’s gaze upon man is silence, that of man’s gaze upon the wolf is something else entirely: the animal becomes tame, it “loses its bravery and ferocity.” Projecting this image upon the situation defined by lupus in fabula, the interlocutors who catch sight of the interloper and address him openly (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”) correspond to someone who realizes that he has been seen by the wolf; the intruder is tamed—the wolf is no longer frightening and the hunter has become the prey. In such situations, the spoken-of person finds himself in a position of weakness in respect to his interlocutors.

Now that we have considered the images used to encapsulate a certain situation—two people who have been speaking about someone when that person unexpectedly arrives—in the form of a proverb, it is time to consider the situation itself. From a strictly linguistic point of view, this situation is perhaps explicable within the framework of Émile Benveniste’s theory of verbal person, which he developed from the work of Arabic grammarians. According to these grammarians’ interpretation of grammatical “person,” the first person corresponds to “he who speaks,” the second to “he to whom one addresses one’s self,” and the third to “he who is absent.” Consistently with this formulation, Benveniste suggests that the only “true” grammatical

69. Benveniste 1966, 252ff. Benveniste’s study has been take up again by Lazzeroni 1994, 267ff., according to whom, along with the “correlation of personality” theorized by Benveniste that opposes the first and the second person to the third, there is also a “correlation of subjectivity” that opposes the first person to the second and the third.
persons of the verb are the first and second, while the so-called “third person”
is in fact a “non-person” represented without any markings of individuality.
Transferring this idea to the pronouns, we might say that “I” and “you” are
“real” personal pronouns with true referential values, while “he” and “she”
refer to the individual about whom one is speaking only as a member of the
set of “others.”70 This is why in some languages the words for “he” and “she”
can function as allocutives when the speaker wishes to distance his or her
interlocutor in some way, whether out of respect or disdain. By addressing
“you” as “he” or “she” (as, for example, in Italian an interlocutor may be
addressed as Lei—that is, with a third person pronoun), the interlocutor is
in some sense depersonalized, distanced below or above their natural status
of “person.” Outside of such cases, it is impossible to address “he” or “she”
as “you.” We can speak of “he,” “she” or “it” as the subject of conversation,
but we cannot make that third person into a second person. By definition,
a “he,” “she” or “it” is absent.

The situation presupposed by both lupus in fabula and “if you were a fig,
you would be in my mouth” thus corresponds to the break that occurs when
the system of oppositions between “person” and “non-person,” between
“those present” and “those absent” falls apart. If the person about whom
one is speaking exists necessarily outside of the conversation, what hap-
pens when that person unexpectedly appears, penetrating into a linguistic
space that does not concern strictly concern them? Communication fails,
and conversation is interrupted. In addition to this linguistic observation,
our anthropological analysis of the images used for expressing this situation
also allows us to describe a state of mind. The situation defined by these
proverbial expressions is perceived as so “uncanny” (in Freud’s sense) that
it is likened to the arrival of a wolf, to the silence imposed by that animal’s
bewitching eye or a kind of metaphorical mastication. The entrance of “he”
or “she” into a conversation that concerns “him” or “her,” resulting in the
transformation of that “he” or “she” into an interlocutor (a “you”), creates
anxiety both in the person speaking about the “he” or “she” and in the “he”
or “she” who discovers him- or herself as the subject of the others’ talk. Put
in different terms, according to cultural convention the individual as topic
of conversation and as personal (grammatical) subject must remain distinct:
they must never meet. If they do happen to meet, communication ceases
to function and the situation created by this encounter takes on a rather
disagreeable and disturbing quality.

The psychic and emotional disturbance caused by such situations prob-
ably relates to beliefs about slanderous talk. In these circumstances, silence

70. Benveniste 1966, 252.
occurs not only because some “other” is being talked about, but because that person is being disparaged. This is similar to the situation described by Freud when he notes that “cultured” men immediately refrain from vulgar speech when a woman enters the room, whereas “in country taverns” the same event prompts scurrilous joking.71 In one ancient source for *lupus in fabula*, the silence imposed upon the original interlocutors is in fact explicitly related to their slanderous talk.72 Moreover, when the proverb appears within “conversational” contexts (rather than metalinguistic discussions), it often appears from the communicative situation that the interloper is being spoken of in categorically negative terms. In one case, the conversation turns on the greedy character of the parasite Gelasimus, who then suddenly shows up;73 in another, Syrus explains how he means to wheedle something skillfully out of the senex Demea, who then unexpectedly appears.74 Must we conclude, therefore, that the uneasiness provoked by this kind of situation corresponds only to breakdown of the rules of discretion and decency—that something is being said about someone that could not be said to them directly, and that this inconsistency is perceived as unpleasant and embarrassing for everyone?75

Such an explanation would be only partial, since slanderous talk is only sporadically associated with the use of *lupus in fabula*. Frequently, the proverb is used in contexts that contain no suggestion whatsoever of maliciousness towards the conversational interloper.76 In fact, only one of the many numerous ancient explanations of this proverb mentions that the spoken-of person was the object of slander; normally, authors do not even mention this possibility.77 Our own linguistic and cultural competence suggests, moreover, that the use of such expressions is independent of libelous intent: the unexpected appearance of the spoken-of person is enough to motivate our use of these conversational formulae.

Disparaging talk therefore appears to occupy an extreme position within the situation defined by *lupus in fabula*, although this position is not always substantially different from that occupied by the simple and neutral fact of “speaking about” another person. Indeed, experience teaches us that we

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71. Freud 1972a, 89.
75. In this sense, the situation of *lupus in fabula* is very similar to that presupposed by apophasis (see above, 20n67), when speech is interrupted precisely out of fear of violating some rule of social behavior.
76. Cf., e.g., *Cic. Att.* 13.33.4, *de Varrone loquebamus, lupus in fabula: venit enim ad me.*
often speak of others primarily because we wish to criticize them: often, then, the extreme situation is what effectively occurs—or at any rate what the “interloper” fears is occurring. This does not imply, however, that the reason for the uneasiness, embarrassment or disturbing character of situation resides only in that it may be defamatory. The phenomenon is in fact much more general.

We have already remarked that cultural convention pretends, quite paradoxically, that people are not (and ought not to be) spoken of by others—or at any rate that people are distinct and different entities when they are being spoken about and when they themselves are participating in dialogue. But this is obviously just a matter of convention; we know things do not really work like that. This is why the belief persists that when someone is the subject of some remote conversation, they can perceive what is happening there through a ringing in the ears or because of the failure of their own conversation. This belief underscores the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make two distinct entities out of a person as subject of the conversation and as the “real” individual. A conversation about someone imperceptibly tends to become a conversation with that person—even if this phenomenon is limited to ringing in the ears. When cultural convention is blatantly contradicted and the individual qua interlocutor comes to coincide with the person qua topic of conversation because that individual has in fact appeared, a sensation of rupture and uneasiness arises. But what kind of anthropological situation is created in such circumstances?

Situations of this sort negatively affect the identity of the “interloper.” If we discover that someone has transformed “us” into the subject of a conversation (“if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth”), it is like encountering a “double” of ourselves that has been circulating unimpeded in others’ conversations. This is what happens to Sosia in Plautus’ Amphitruo, when he finds himself standing before another ‘Sosia’; or to Euripides’ Helen, when she learns that it was only her eidōlon (“image”) that was seduced by Paris, first causing the Trojan War and now roaming the seas with her husband Menelaus. Conversely, when the participants in a conversation discover that the person about whom they have been speaking is there before them in flesh and blood (lupus in fabula), it is like seeing the ghost of a dead man: the absent person has suddenly and disconcertingly become present.

Perhaps, then, the Arabic grammarians’ definition of the third person—“he who is absent”—has a much more profound anthropological meaning than its use as a linguistic label suggests: by definition, “he who is absent” lives in another world, absent just as the dead and supernatural beings are absent. This is why the spoken-of person—like Hermes psuchopompos or Cristina Brahe—brings silence in tow. In short, the situation of lupus in
“fabula” and “if you were a fig, you would be in my mouth” is perceived as anxiety producing precisely because it involves the fracture of someone’s identity and a crisis of “presence.” When this cultural convention falls apart, it reveals a sort of divided “I,” exposing the interloper to the existence of his Double, or revealing the presence of the “original” of the verbal substitute (“he” or “she”) that had been constructed by the participants of a conversation. And when this occurs, everyone is stunned into silence.

**Death and Oblivion**

Death is silence and it cannot be any other way. Of their very nature, we cannot speak with the dead. They are absent, existing only in our memories or in conversations of which they are the subject. The dead are not “subjects” with whom we can sit down and have a conversation. For this reason, a dead man who returns and speaks inspires great fear. There is another condition, however, that relates to silence and that similarly distinguishes death from life: forgetfulness. When silence reigns, it is notoriously also impossible to remember: for example, when Odysseus goes to speak with the Dead in Homer’s *Odyssey*, he discovers that only “the mind of Teiresias is solid. Only to him do the gods grant a mind full of sense, even in death, while all the others flit about like shades.” The dead do not have minds, sense or memories: Anticlea, Odysseus’ own mother, recognizes her son only after drinking the blood of the slaughtered victims. They do not remember anything of mortal life; that is why Seneca defines them as “forgetful of themselves” (*oblitos sui*).

Because the kingdoms of the living and the dead must remain distinct, Hades extends oblivion over all that came before. Above all, these two worlds must not communicate: In Vergil, souls destined for reincarnation drink from the fountain of Lethe in order to forget the experiences that they have already lived and to be able to confront the new life that awaits them. At the oracle of Lebedea, where in the cave of Trophonius those wishing to consult the oracle act out a kind of mock descent into Hades. The petitioner must drink the water of two fountains before descending—*lēthē*, “in order to reach a state of oblivion concerning

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78. In Hippocratic medicine, the onset of “silence” is always bound to disease or to “death” (just as the “voice” is connected to health and “life”): see Ciani 1983, 159–72.
all that they had thought up to that moment” and mnēmosunē, “in order to remember everything that they had seen in their descent.”82 As Vernant puts it, “he drank from the first and immediately forgot everything to do with his human life, and, like a dead man, he entered into the realm of Night.”83

The association of forgetfulness and death is found in other mythological tales. When Orpheus, leaving the underworld, violates the injunctions of Persephone by turning to look back at Eurydice, he is overcome by a fit of forgetfulness.84 At that moment, Lake Avernus resounds three times and Eurydice is swallowed up again by the infernal regions. Orpheus’ failure of memory thus brings about the death of his beloved, as if in the act of forgetting he had again brought on that condition of perennial oblivion in which Eurydice had remained before her unexpected liberation. The denouement of Ariadne’s story explores the same symbolic connection. Overwhelmed by her misfortune, the girl asks the Eumenides that the young hero Theseus bring ruin upon himself and his family with the same “state of mind” (mens) he had when he left her on the deserted island. These are the sinister threats of a woman scorned and near the end; but the “state of mind” (mens) in which Theseus had abandoned her was the casual forgetfulness of a faithless lover.85 And again, it is a failure of memory that brings about the death of Aegaeus, the hero’s father, who had asked his son to hoist a white flag on his return as a sign of his success and safety. Theseus, who up to that moment had remembered everything “with sure memory” (constanti mente), now has his mens “wrapped in blind darkness;” “forgetful in spirit” (oblito . . . pectore), he brings about his father’s death, when the old man throws himself from the rocks.86

Life and death must never communicate and so silence stands between them. When death enters among the living, conversation fails. In the same way, death must not preserve any memory of life. Thus, silence and forgetfulness are two complementary aspects of the noncommunication that regulates the interaction of this world and the next. Even if communication between the living and the dead were possible, such a conversation would be between those who remember (the living) and those who live in total oblivion of themselves (the dead). What, then, of those moments when the failure of conversation and the failure of memory appear to intersect, as if in

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82. Paus. Desc. 9.39.8. For other, less complete descriptions of the oracle of Trophonius, see the sources collected by Frazer 1898, 2000ff.
83. Vernant 1965a. On the relationship between death and forgetfulness in the Greco-Roman tradition, see now Brusatin 2000, 3ff.
85. Cat. 64.200ff.
86. Cat. 64.208ff.
short circuit—when conversation is interrupted because a speaker suddenly realizes that he has forgotten what he wanted to say?

In one of his letters, Seneca describes a peculiar figure of his times, Calvisius Sabinus:

He was exceedingly wealthy and had the nature and patrimony of a freedman. I have never seen a man more indecorously blessed. He had such a bad memory that sometimes he forgot Odysseus’ name, sometimes Achilles’, sometimes Priam’s, whom he knew about as well as we know our teachers. No old slave nomenclator, who cannot recall for his master the exact names but invents them, ever saluted the citizens as poorly as he did the Achaeans and the Trojans. Nevertheless, he wanted to appear learned, and for this reason, he came up with the following expedient: he bought some slaves at a rather high price, one of whom knew Homer by heart, another Hesiod, and then assigned each of the others one of the nine lyric poets. You must not be surprised at the fact that he had paid so dear for them, given that he had not found them already instructed but had had them prepared for this purpose. When he had finally procured this troupe of slaves, he really began to annoy his guests. He would keep them all at the ready at the foot of the couch, to ask them from time to time some verse that he wished to cite—but he would also interrupt them in the middle of their speech. Satellius Quadratus, an exploiter of stupid rich people . . . once suggested to him to hire some grammarians to pick up the leftovers after dinner. And when Sabinus said to him that each of those slaves cost him one hundred thousand sesterces, the other retorted, “You could have bought as many bookcases full of books for less.” But Sabinus had convinced himself that he knew everything that those slaves did, just because they belonged to him.87

Calvisius Sabinus cuts a rather pathetic figure. If his learned slaves somewhat resemble the Greek Carmadas—who according to Pliny “recited by memory, on request, the volumes of an entire library, as if he were reading them” (quae quis exegerat volumina in bibliotheca legentis modo representavit)88—their master is more like the grammarian Orbilius Pupillus Beneventanus, who earned himself the surname Oblivio Litterarum because he had forgotten everything he once knew by the time he was one hundred years old.89 Unlike the poor Orbilius, however, Calvisius Sabinus possessed

87. Sen. Ep. mor. 27.5ff.
88. Plin. Nat. hist. 7.89.
89. Suet. Gramm. rhet. 9. The epithetic was given to him in an epigram of Furius Bibaculus (fr. 3 Courtney).
sufficient economic resources to remedy this terrible inconvenience; he sim-
ply bought others’ memories, convinced that he himself would somehow
possess their intellectual capabilities thereby. Perhaps Sabinus took literally
the principle of Roman law that “we acquire not only through ourselves, but
also through those whom we have in our potestas, manus or mancipium.”90
As the owner of a troupe of slaves who “possessed” good culture and (more
importantly) excellent memories, Sabinus considered himself to possess those
spiritual endowments in turn, believing that “he knew everything that those
slaves did, just because they belonged to him.” Notwithstanding the best
efforts of the slaves that he kept at the ready at the foot of his couch like
some vocal library or an online archive, still he stumbled in pronouncing
the words they had recalled for him not a moment before. Conversations in
Calvisius Sabinus’ house must have failed often—and not because Hermes
had entered the room or because an interloper had appeared unannounced.
The obstacle to communication was Sabinus’ terrible memory, and it was
no help trying to revive it by purchasing those extraordinary slaves. Perhaps
what happened to Calvisius Sabinus was the same thing that had happened
to Messala Corvinus, of which Trimalchio also complains: “I have such a
good memory, that often I forget what my own name is.”91
The truth, as Pliny says, is that “in man, there is nothing so precarious
[as memory]”:

morborum et casus iniurias atque etiam metus sentit, alias particulatim,
alias universa. ictus lapide oblitus est litteras tantum; ex praealto tecto lapsus
matris et adfinium propinquorumque cepit oblivionem, alius aegrotus servoru-
rum, etiam sui vero nominis Messala Corvinus orator. itaque saepe deficere
temptat ac meditatur vel quieto corpore et valido.92

It suffers the injuries of sickness or of a fall, and even of fright: sometimes
partially, sometimes totally. A man struck by a rock forgot the letters of the
alphabet; another, falling from a very high roof, forgot his mother, his rela-
tives and his friends; yet another, overtaken by sickness, did not recognize
his slaves, while the orator Messalla Corvinus could not even remember his
own name. The memory attempts and conspires to flee from us even when
our body is safe and unharmed.

90. Gai. Instit. 2.86ff., 3.164 and 221. Cf. De Zulueta 1963, II, 80, “The basic principles are
that a paterfamilias inevitably acquires what his dependants acquire.”
91. Petr. Satyr. 66, tam bonae memoriae sum, ut frequenter nomen meum obliviscar. This is a
proverbial expression: cf. Otto 1890, 244. On Messalla Corvinus, see Plin. Nat. hist. 7.90.
The memory is in constant danger and forgetfulness waits patiently in ambush—even when we are in good health (or believe that we are). This is why some suspected that failures of memory—especially when sudden—were caused by magical arts. Cicero, for example, recounts that during the defense of Titinia, Curio spoke after him but “suddenly forgot the case in its entirety and he said that this occurred because of Titinia’s potions and enchantments” (subito totam causam oblitus est idque veneficiis et cantionibus Titiniae factum est). 93

It would be easy to make Calvisius Sabinus the archetype of the many learned and cultured people who believe it is their right to usurp and exploit others’ intelligence to their own ends, convinced that they know everything others do for the simple reason that they belong to their familia. But Sabinus’ fragile and deficient memory inevitably brings us from the comedy of knowledge to the darkness of tragedy: Sabinus, overcome by oblivion, forgetful of the words that his learned assistants have just whispered to him, resembles a soul of the Homeric Nekuia. The phrenes (“spiritual faculties”) of the dead in the Odyssey are equally unstable (empedoi), 94 their heads are “worn out” (amenēna karēna), 95 and their minds are “senseless” (aphrades). 96 Sabinus also seems like one of those “shadows of the weary” (eidōla kamontōn). 97 Indeed, instead of a slave who knew Homer by heart and could provide him with citations from the Odyssey, Sabinus should have had someone actually perform it—pouring him a little sacrificial blood to drink, as Odysseus did for Teiresias, to make him remember.

Living Archives

Above, Seneca produces an interesting comparison in describing Calvisius Sabinus’ défaillances by employing the technical term for a slave employed for the specific purpose of reminding a forgetful or distracted master of the names of those he encountered in the course of his business (nomenclator). The image of this comparandum is fitting: a bad nomenclator who mistakes the names of those his master must greet represents very well the gaffes of someone who mistakes one Homeric hero for another. In the Senecan account, however, this reference to the nomenclator anticipates the appearance of those learned slaves whose duty was to remind their master of the

94. Hom. Od. 10.493,
95. Hom. Od. 10.521 and 536, 11.29 and 49,
96. Hom. Od. 11.476,
97. Hom. Il. 3.278, 23.72; Od. 11.476, 24.10,
texts he had forgotten, and who function in a manner very similar to the nomenclatores. Here, we enter the fascinating realm of “memory aids”—but not in the sense of mnemonic devices, mental maps, techniques of memorization, notes or memoranda that take advantage of writing (or in more modern times, of printing). Instead, we are about to encounter a kind of living instrument of memory, a figure whose duty and function was to combat forgetfulness—to remember and to make others remember.

There were various such figures at Rome. Nomenclatores were employed to remind their masters of the names of clientes; or, during elections, to allow the candidates to create a false sense of familiarity with their constituents. (Otherwise, a Roman citizen might be compelled to use the generic appellative dominus, roughly translatable as “Sir”). There were also monitores, whose job was to stand next to the orator in the forum and remind him of what he should say or do. The same word also denoted what we might call a theatrical “prompter” as well as libri commentarii.

When memory fails, help is needed—and in a culture where writing had not yet supplanted orality in the task of conserving and archiving information, “memory aids” might be not only lists of “talking points” or agendas, but also the living memories of human beings. (From this perspective, it is interesting that libri commentarii as well as “prompters” in a theater could be defined as monitores: begging pardon for the pun, it is almost as if the designation of those written instruments still preserved some memory of their oral predecessors.) Consider, for example, the words of Euryalus to Odysseus when the hero presents himself in disguise. The arrogant suitor says that Odysseus does not seem to him “a man expert in contests, but rather one who sails upon the sea in a ship of many oars, who commands merchant sailors and cares for the cargo, goods and alluring gain.” In the Homeric text, the expression phortou...mnēmōn means literally “mindful of the cargo.” On the significance of this term, the ancient Homeric exegetes make some observations that are worth considering.

According to a scholiast’s comment on Odyssey 8.163, it was a mnēmōn who “remembered what the value of each piece was.” Homer’s use of this

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98. See the fascinating discussion of Bolzoni 1995.
99. Cf. Cic. Att. 4.1.5; Mur. 77. The name nomenclator was also given to the slave who reminded his master of the names of those who came to salute him in the morning at home. Sen. Ben. 1.3.10; see also Ep. mor. 19.11; Brev. vit. 14.5.
100. Cf. Sen. Ep. 1.3.1, obvios, si nomen non succurrit, ‘dominos’ salutamus; Mart. 1.112 and 5.57.
101. Cic. Verr. 1.52; Orat. 2.24.99; Quint. Inst. orat. 6.4.9, etc.
103. Hom. Od. 8.159ff.
expression, moreover, indicated to some—again according to the scholiast—that the heroic age did not know the use of the alphabet: “they say that they kept the cargo in memory because they did not have knowledge of letters.” The scholiast goes on to say that it was for this reason—i.e., the maintenance of cargo lists—that the Phoenician traders invented the alphabet. In ancient usage, however, the word mnémōn was applied to both the “secretary” (grammateus) and the “provisioner” (epimelētēs).

The mnēmōn, then, appears to have been a kind of on-board commissary and, at the same time, a cargo manifest—someone who both took care of those on board and also registered the value of each piece of merchandise in memory. In the absence of writing, the inventory of goods corresponded not to a written document, but to a person—the mnēmōn—who functioned as an archivist, paradoxically also constituting the archive itself. The Phoenicians invented the alphabet to free the mnēmōn from this difficult task, wishing to delegate to the more trustworthy expedient of writing the data that previously had burdened the memory.

In this sense, the polarity between the two Greek expressions—the more recent gramma- mateus and the more ancient mnēmōn—takes on almost emblematic value. The word gramma- mateus derives from gramma (“letter of the alphabet”) and therefore provides us with a “written” equivalent of the ancient mnemonic functionary. Plato amuses himself in an elegant metaphorical construction by reversing the two terms of the question, defining “memory” (mnēmē) as “our gramma- mateus” and describing it while he registered the impressions that he received in written form (graphein). In other words, “graphic” reasoning had already so pervaded the world of information and communication that, for Plato, “memory” itself could become a scribe. In Latin, too, terms such as obliviscor, oblivio and (even more transparently) oblittero take their meaning from the act of erasing a surface on which letters have been traced; that is, “forgetfulness” has assumed the form of an erasure—the cancellation of what has been written.

Returning to the mnēmōn. Although little evidence remains, it is apparent that this figure played an important role in myth and heroic tales:

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106. Plat. Phil. 39a. The dialectic between oral and written memory, or oral and written communication, was obviously maintained for a long time in Greece—in, e.g., the case of the gramma- mateus, the city’s “public reader” who “gave voice” to the letter written by Nikias (Thuc. Hist. 7.8–10). Nikias decided to entrust his message to writing because he feared the “obscuring” it would have undergone “through a messenger” (en tōi angelōi); see the analysis of Guastella 1997, 15ff.


for example, in the story of Achilles and Tenes, Thetis prohibits her son from killing Tenes because he has been honored by Apollo—and Achilles was destined to die if ever he killed someone of Apollo’s line. Thetis therefore assigns a slave to stay beside Achilles to remind him of this prohibition. Unknowingly, however, Achilles kills Tenes and, when he realizes what he has done, also kills the slave who had failed in his duty. In Lycophron the slave is actually named “Mnemon,” revealing his function through his name. Lycophron also mentions the interesting detail that the slave failed in his task because he had been “conquered by forgetfulness” (lēthargōi sphaleis).

Eustathius provides ample evidence of other mnēmones of heroic legend, beginning with an account of the story of Chalcon Kyparisseus who, according to Asclepiades of Mirlea, was assigned as “mnēmōn and squire” to Nestor’s son Antilochus. Nestor had received an oracle that his son “should keep away from the Ethiopian,” and therefore assigned Chalcon to his son to remind him of this. Chalcon, however, fell in love with Penthesilea and ran to help her and thus was killed by Achilles. Antilochus was in turn killed by Memnon (the “Ethiopian”) and Chalcon’s body was impaled by the Greeks. Eustathius remarks that “mnēmones were given also to other heroes,” as in the case of Achilles already mentioned. According to Timolaus of Macedonia, even Patroclus had his own mnēmōn named Eudoros, who was assigned to Patroclus “so he would not drive too far forward” during the battle. But Eudoros was killed by Pyraichmos, who was then killed by Patroclus—and Patroclus, as we know, was himself killed by Hector. According to Antipatros of Acanthus, Hector, too, had a mnēmōn named Daretes Phrygius whose task it was to remind him “not to kill anyone dear to Achilles.” After deserting his post, however, Daretes was killed by Odysseus—and Hector’s

110. See the scholion of Tzetzes ad Lyc. Alex. 241ff.
111. Lyc. Alex. 241–2.
112. Comm. ad Hom. II. 11.521. Cf. Halliday 1928. 133ff., who does not, however, comment on this other than to note its late, literary character. It is useful to note that the account of Eustathius is echoed by the resumé of Ptolomaeus Chennus’s Nova Historia given by Photius (Bib. 147a). On Ptolomaeus Chennus, see “Ptolemaios Chennos” in RE XXIII, 2, 1959, col. 1862.
115. Perhaps an author invented by Ptolomaeus Chennus; see “Antipatros von Akanthus” in RE I, 2, 1894, col. 2517. Jacoby 1957, I A, 296–97 has a section dedicated to Antipater of Acanthus, in which he cites the text of Eustathius and that of Ptolomaeus Chennus from Photius. No entry either in the commentary or in the Nachträge corresponds to the text, however.
fate is well known. According to Eresius,116 Protesilaus also had a mnemonic named Dardanus of Thessaly. Protesilaus’ father had assigned Dardanus to his son after receiving an oracle that “he would die if he was the first to disembark.” Protesilaus was later killed by a “Trojan man” (Dardanos anēr) because of Dardanus’ inattentiveness to his task.117 Photius catalogues other mnēmones:118 Odyssēus’ father is supposed to have given to his son a Cephallenian mnēmōn by the name of Muiscos, while Achilles is supposed to have had a Carthaginian mnēmōn named Noemon. As may be seen, Achilles always has mnēmones with very significant names: Mnemon’s name derives from “memory” itself (mnēmē), whereas Noemon’s comes from “intelligence” (nous).

The figure of the mnēmōn seems to be inserted into well-known episodes of Homeric myth—the heroic deaths of Achilles, Patroclus, Antilochus, Hector, Protesilaus and so on—almost as a touch of tragic irony. These are all heroes who receive explicit condemnations of fate and for this reason are given mnēmones with the specific task of keeping them from their own destinies. Consequently, the figure of the mnēmōn is entrusted with the part of the story or event that we know from the most traditional variants of the myth to have been the cause of the hero’s death. Thus, Achilles’ mnēmōn had the task of reminding him “not to kill a descendant of Apollo,” Hector’s the task of reminding him “not to kill someone dear to Achilles,” Protesilaus’ that of reminding him “not to disembark first” and so on. No mnēmōn, however, can stand in the way of destiny. According to the logic of myth, the mnēmōn must always fail in the task he has been assigned; the story demands that the mnēmōn play the paradoxical role of he who remembers (and makes others remember) and he who forgets.

There are various reasons for the mnēmōn’s failure: it may be a matter of explicit—but otherwise unexplained—forgetfulness (Mnemon); of love (Chalcon), desertion (Daretes) or simple absentmindedness (Dardanus of Thessaly). In this last case, the story is particularly clever. At the end, we learn that a mnēmōn named “Dardanus” was probably the least suitable of all to play the role of bodyguard for Protesilaus, given the homonymy he shared with the man destined to kill the hero. Here, the mnēmōn has the paradoxi-

116. An author known only to Eustathius: cf. “Eresios” in RE VI, 1, 1907, col. 420. In Ptolomeus Chennus, the story is attributed to Antipater of Acanthus. In the apparatus criticus, Jacoby 1957, I A, 297 notes that before “Eresios” the name of the author has been lost.
117. The killing of Protesilaus by a “Dardanian man” (Dardanos anēr) is told by Hom. Il. 2.701 and therefore the story represents a somewhat fantastic re-elaboration of the Homeric line. Cf. Thraemer, 1901. This obscure Homeric mention had been explained in various ways already in antiquity, attributing to the mysterious “Dardanian” the identity of Aeneas, Hector, Euphorbus and so forth. Cf. Leaf 1900, I, 103 ad loc.
cal task of defending the hero from “himself”: he was supposed to be the faithful “double” of his charge but turned out to be that of his assassin.

In this type of story, the mnēmōn acts as a kind of alter ego for the hero. Like an image reflected in a mirror, he is supposed to warn and remind the hero of something—even if in the event he deliberately does not do so or does not succeed in doing so. The mnēmōn thus functions as a kind of external memory bank for the hero—a walking monumentum, as it were. This figure thus closely resembles the Roman monitor entrusted with the task of reminding his master of a single event. (In other cases, the same effect is obtained by modifying a significant part of the body: for example, letting one’s hair grow—or shaving it—until a certain goal had been achieved, somewhat as we do when we change the position of a ring or tie a knot in a handkerchief.)

Modern culture is highly sensitive to the theme of information storage. It is therefore worth considering the role of the mnēmōn, monitor and nomenclator from the perspective of modern theory of “distributed cognition,” which explores the ways in which human beings entrust a part of our cognition and memory to some aspect (or indeed many aspects) of our external environment. This process permits us to “unload” our minds of excess data that would otherwise be difficult to utilize. In this light, mnēmones, monitores and nomenclatores were clearly more powerful than the classic knot in a handkerchief, the agenda, the card file and most modern data storage systems. These individuals not only contained information, but also were capable of producing it whenever needed. In roughly technological terms, we might say that these ancient figures were themselves “databases” that provided a kind of interactive “software” program for accessing all the information contained on the “disk.” The limited development of written culture as well as the easy availability of “human instruments” in Roman society guaranteed that even memory aids and information support systems were realized through a form of human interaction.

Finally, there are those cases in which the mnēmōn served a public and specifically juridical function. We know of certain mnēmones whose duty was to “remember the religious calendar” (hieromnēmein), for example. As Gernet notes in his famous study, the mnēmōn “prefigures in Greece char-

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119. Her. Hist. 1.82.7–8 recounts that after losing Tirea, the Argives forbade anyone to allow their hair to grow and prohibited the women from wearing gold jewelry until they had regained it. The Spartans decreed the opposite: although they had never worn their long hair up to that moment, they decide that from then on they would let it grow.

120. See the well-known work of Norman 1995, 139–54, as well as Vigotsky 1987, 81ff.

121. Ar. Nub. 624.
The title of **mnēmones** later passed to the magistrates charged with preserving written documents; but having no knowledge of writing, the so-called Law Code of Gortyn was entrusted to a group of **mnēmones** who functioned as assistants to the magistrates, as true and proper “living records.” The **mnēmōn** had not only the capacity to remember and to make others remember the past; above all, he possessed the authority of memory. He enjoyed the dignity of an archive and was as reliable as only written documents are for us.

**“Stuffed Ears” and the Location of Memory**

Let us return to Rome. A gloss informs us that the **nomenclatores** who reminded candidates of the names of their constituents had a peculiar nickname: **fartores** (literally, “stuffers” or “fillers”). Paulus Festus explains: “**nomenclatores** are called **fartores** because without anyone realizing it they ‘stuff’ all the names of the people whom the candidate must greet into his ear” (fartores nomenclatores, **qui clam velut infercirent nomina salutatorum in aurem candidati**). The metaphor is almost ridiculous; actually, it is probably comic, since it corresponds to certain images found in Plautus: for instance, charged with carrying a message to Toxilus, the slave-girl Sophoclidisca remarks, “I will approach Toxilus; I will load his ears with the things I have been charged with telling him” (conveniam hunc Toxilum; eius auris quae mandata sunt onerabo). Jokes in Roman political life were apparently inspired by the comic poets and grammarians, diligent collectors of words, noted down these creations of the vernacular language in their scholarly lexicons, making them objects of erudition.

The metaphor is telling, however: the **nomenclator** who whispers the name of some unfamiliar individual into the candidate’s ear behaves as a **fartor**—a professional “stuffer” of animals (especially birds) or sausage maker. The candidate’s ears are like an empty skin into which the slave stuffs the names of those the candidate should (but does not) recognize. That is, the ears function as a place where the memory “keeps” words.

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123. Paul. Fest. p. 78 Lindsay. Cf. also Acro’s scholion on Hor. Serm. 3.3.229.
126. Cf. TLL VI, 287, 8ff. For **fartor** in the sense of *saginatōr*: Plaut. Truc. 105; Ter. Eun. 257 (and Eugraphius’s commentary); Hor. Serm. 2.3.229; and, above all, Col. Re rust. 8.7.1, “it is the task of the **fartor** to fatten the chickens, not the peasant’s”; for **fartor** in the sense of “sausage-maker,” cf. Donatus ad Ter. Eun. 257, fartores qui insicia et farcimina faciunt.
Within this metaphorical field, we may once more consider the weasel. Besides being thought to conceive through the ears and give birth through the mouth—as we have seen—the weasel was also apparently believed to conceive through the mouth and give birth through the ears. This belief also relates to language:

The Law (Leviticus 11:29) says: Do not eat the weasel or anything like it. The Physiologus said of the weasel that it has this nature: its mouth receives from the male and, having conceived, it gives birth from the ears. There are some who eat the sacred bread in church, but as soon as they have left, they reject the word from their ears, like the impure weasel. And they become like the deaf asp that seals its own ears.  

To express that someone needs to be reminded of something, why does Roman culture say “to stuff the ears”? By the same token, why can forgetting what one has heard be likened to having one’s ears “emptied”? Because in the process of oral communication, information must of course pass through the ears. But I suspect memory is also directly involved in the “stuffed ears” of he who must not forget and in the “empty ears” of he who rejects the words that he has heard. Let us see.

Horace, desperately beset by that infamous babbling garrulus who has decided to torture him at all costs, is rescued only by the unexpected arrival of someone embroiled in a court case with the annoying man.  

 licet antestari (“Are you disposed to bear me witness?”) and he responds, ego vero oppono auriculam (“Obviously, I offer my earlobe”). Blabbermouths are a curse; but what of Horace’s earlobe? Porphyrio explains its significance: “The adversary of the annoying man asks Horace if he would be disposed to bear him witness, so as to allow him to drag the man before the praetor. . . . When someone called another to witness, he touched him on the earlobe and said to him ‘Are you disposed to bear me witness?”’ (adversarius molesti illius Horatium consult at an permittat se antestari, injecta manu extracturus ad praetorem quod vadimonio non paruerit . . . porro autem qui antestabatur, auriculam ei tangbat atque dicebat, ‘licit te antestari?’). 

The act of touching someone on the earlobe has symbolic value and serves precisely to remind someone of something. We know this from other

128. Hor. Serm. 1.9.75ff.
130. Comm. in Hor. Serm. p. 165.
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evidence as well: Vergil recounts that when Apollo addressed him, the god “pulled my ear and admonished me” (aurem / vellit et admonuit). The poet had abandoned his duty; rather than writing pastoral poetry, herding flocks and singing a carmen deductum, he had turned to celebrating kings and battles. By pulling one of his ears, the god meant to remind him of this. Likewise, Seneca wishes that there were “some guardian that could pull my ear (aurem subinde pervellat) at the right moment, distance us from gossiping and protest against the praises of the masses.” In other words, touching and pulling the ear was a gestural translation of the verb admonere. For this reason, touching someone’s earlobe was a customary invitation for him or her to appear before a magistrate on one’s behalf.

But why, for the Romans, did the act of touching the earlobe function in this way? Pliny explains the meaning of the gesture as follows: “The memory is situated in the earlobe and by touching it, we call someone as a witness. Likewise, the place behind the right ear is dedicated to Nemesis, where we pass our ring finger after having touched it with the lips, as if to replace there the pardon that we ask of the gods for our words” (est in aure ima memoriae locus, quem tangentes antestamur; est post aurem aque dexteram Nemeseos . . . quo referimus tactum ore proximum a minimo digitum, veniam sermonis a diis ibi recondentes). As part of a “symbolic anatomy” associating the faculties or sentiments of the soul with certain parts of the body—Pliny informs us that according to popular belief the site of vitalitas, for example, was the knees—the earlobe functioned as the seat of memory. Since memory was “located” in the earlobe, touching or pulling that part of the body served as a way to jog the memory—just as touching someone’s knees initiated an act of supplication, an appeal to their most intimate vitalitas.

A final observation on the mnemonic powers of the ears. Plutarch asserts that the hearing duct connected directly to the psuchē (“soul”): in other words, that between the ear and the individual’s spiritual faculties a direct channel of communication existed. In this regard, what Pliny has said about

131. See Otto 1890, 48.
132. Verg. Ecl. 6.3.
134. This symbolic gesture lives on today in certain cultures, although the modern act seems to have assumed an almost exclusively punitive or prohibitive meaning: it is used to warn someone (usually a child) not to repeat a certain action: cf. Morris 1983, 256ff. Nevertheless, a good tug on the ear—even if it is only metaphorical—preserves some connection with the sphere of memory and still has the value of an admonition. It is possible, moreover, that something of this ancient custom’s meaning remains in the modern habit of pulling someone’s ears on their birthday as a solemn reminder of how far they have come in life.
the “place of Nemesis” merits further comment. According to Pliny, when someone wishes to ask pardon of the gods for some imprudent word they have uttered (thus potentially inviting the arrival of Nemesis), it is customary to pass the ring finger across the lips and then to “put it back” behind the lobe of the right ear. Was this to signify that in the future one would be mindful not to commit the same mistake again? This gesture is almost equivalent to tugging one’s own ear to remind one’s self not to repeat such an anger-provoking blunder, and thus to screen one’s self from the vengeance of the gods. In fact, even in some modern cultures—for example, in Turkey and southern Italy—touching the ear has apotropaic value.

We also learn from Pliny that “some placate anxiety by passing a bit of saliva behind the ear with their finger” (alius saliva post aurum digito relata sollicitudinem animi propitiat). As often in the case of gestures, they are difficult to define and interpret unambiguously—but it is possible that in the act of passing the ring finger behind the right ear after touching it to the lips as well in passing saliva behind the ear with the finger, the “meanings” of self-admonition, saliva’s apotropaic power, and even unrelated, nervous movement caused by situational anxiety all coexist. In such cases, by touching meaningful parts of our body we communicate directly with ourselves, using a language whose deepest meanings we have only partially forgotten.

We could continue this journey through the symbolic places of memory and oblivion, language and silence at some length, to prove just how much the cultures of antiquity differ from our own—at least with regard to communication and its symbology. But we will stop here, since we seem to have come full circle to the ears—the ears of Hermes, god and symbol of communication.

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139. Morris 1983, 259–64 explains this gesture as the equivalent of “touching a metal,” with reference to an earring that is no longer worn. Pliny demonstrates that this explanation is incorrect.
The universe of the novel, and of the *Satyricon* in particular, is governed by coincidence. Encolpius and Giton board a ship and—what a coincidence!—the ship’s captain is none other than their enemy, Lichas. Of course, by the time they realize this, it is already too late. But what to do? Toss themselves into the sea? Hide themselves in a sack, hoping that when they reach port their friend Eumolpus will carry them down to safety, hidden amongst the luggage? Instead, Eumolpus convinces them to shave off their hair and cover their faces with *stigmata* as if they were two fugitive slaves, since, he reasons, such a transformation would render them unrecognizable. But as things turn out, Eumolpus’ solution is the worst they could have found—for in fact cutting one’s hair during a sea voyage is a sign of bad luck. So when another passenger observes them occupied in this inauspicious task, he denounces them to the captain (who in the meantime has seen in a dream exactly whom he has been transporting aboard his ship). Charged with bringing misfortune upon the ship and its crew, the two stowaways are hauled before Lichas who—of course—recognizes them. Eumolpus, therefore, finding himself and his companions in dire straits, attempts to defend his two friends, maintaining with great cheek that they boarded the ship deliberately, in order to beg pardon for their previous misbehavior. But Encolpius and Giton’s unfortunate attempt to disguise themselves instantly convinces Lichas that they had not, in fact, boarded the ship for this purpose.
noli, inquit, causam confundere . . . si ulter venerunt, cur nudavere crinibus capita? vultum enim qui permutat, fraudem parat, non satisfac tionem.¹

“Don’t try to disrupt the proceedings!” he said. “If they came on their own accord, why did they cut their hair? When someone alters his appearance, he intends to deceive, not to render satisfaction.”

Eumolpus does not throw in the towel so easily. At this point, the ship has already been transformed into a courtroom—or better yet, into a school of rhetoric—and he attempts to resolve Lichas’ declamatio with the following rebuttal:

intellego . . . nihil magis obesse iuvenibus miseris quam quod nocte depop suerunt capillos: hoc argumento incidisse in navem videntur, non venisse.²

I am fully aware that nothing harms the case of these poor young men more than the fact that at some point on the night in question they did away with their hair. Based on this argumentum, it would appear that they stumbled upon this ship by accident, rather than coming aboard by express purpose.

The “Inferential” Sign

Eumolpus and Giton’s freshly-shaven heads are an argumentum—for now we can say the “proof”³—of the fact that they boarded the ship not to seek pardon from Lichas, but simply because they did not know that he was its captain. Eumolpus realizes that Encolpius and Giton’s intentions when they boarded the ship can be “inferred” from this: They must have come on board by chance, not to seek pardon from its captain—otherwise, once they were aboard and understood (heavens!) where they were, they would not have cut off their hair to avoid being recognized. Eumolpus has studied his rhetoric well and employs the correct terminology: Quintilian tells us that the natura omnium argumentorum is in fact ut sit ratio per ea quae certa sunt fidem dubiis adferens⁴ (“to be a ratio capable of providing certainty to that which is doubt-

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¹ Petr. Sat. 107.7ff.
² Petr. Sat. 107.12.
³ The “argument” of this chapter—namely, the Latin word argumentum—is extremely vast. In these pages, I do not intend to exhaust the subject, which would have necessitated a detailed discussion of a huge number of passages, but rather to indicate a possible route through some uses of this word, above all those that are less well known. For a general discussion of argumentum, its most recurrent meanings and the principal biographical references, see Lumpe 1984, 299ff.
⁴ Quint. Inst. orat. 5.10.8ff. Cf. also 5.10.11, ergo cum sit argumentum ratio probationem
ful by means of what is certain”). In order to fulfill this function—i.e., to
give certainty to that which is doubtful by means of that which is certain—
argumentum has an inferential structure: it is a sign understood “as a single
perceivable phenomenon, which refers to a fact not directly knowable.” In
the “trial” sketched out by Petronius, two opinions are contrasted, and it is
in doubt whether Encolpius and Giton got on board the ship to seek pardon
from Lichas (as Eumolpus sustains) or if they happened upon it by chance
(as Lichas argues). The act of cutting their hair functions as a ratio capable
of “providing certainty” to that which is “in doubt” by means of what is
“certain”: it is an argumentum in every respect, therefore.

Everyday Inferences and Metaphors of Argumentum

The inferential mechanism underlying argumentum is clear in uses of this
term. As an example, we may take an amusing scene of Plautus’ Truculentus
in which the soldier Stratophanes receives news from the slave girl
Astaphium that her mistress, the courtesan Phronesium, has given birth.
In actual matter of fact, it is all a ruse: Phronesium has procured herself a
baby from another mother and intends to pass it off as the soldier’s child.
Stratophanes wants more than anything to believe that the child is his: ehem,
ecquid mei similest? (“My! Does he look like me at all?”) he asks. Astaphium
is quick with an answer: rogas? / quin ubi natust machaeram et clipeum posce-
bat sibi? (“Do you need to ask? He was not born but a moment when he
asked for a sword and shield”). Stratophanes has no doubt about it at that
point: meus est, scio iam de argumentis (“Yes, he’s mine; I’m sure of it from
the argumenta”). If a newborn immediately asks for a shield and a sword,
it means that he is Stratophanes’ son: it is possible to “infer” from these
argumenta who the child’s father is and to have proof of its paternity.

Something similar happens in Amphitruo, when Sosia must confront the
aggression of his double, the god Mercury, who has taken on his identity
in every respect (appearance, stature, bearing and so forth). Mercury/Sosia
is trying to convince the unlucky slave that he is the real Sosia. The battle
is hard-fought indeed, because Mercury/Sosia, being a god, knows all the

praestans, qua colligitur aliud per aliud, et quae quod eset dubium per id quod dubium non est con-
firmat, necesse est esse aliquid in causa quae probatione non eget, “consequently, since argumentum is
a ratio of probatory nature, through which one thing is inferred by means of another, and through
which that which is in doubt is confirmed by that which is certain, it is necessary that in the case
something exists that does not in its own turn require proving.”

5. See Manetti 1987, 205ff., in reference to the Rhetorica ad Herennium.
most hidden secrets of the real Sosia’s life and uses them as proof of the fact that he is the “real” Sosia. It is already an ordeal when the true Sosia, now desperate, asks Mercury/Sosia to tell him what he was doing in his tent while the rest of the army was fighting against the army of Pterelaus: *victus sum, si dixeris* (“I’m done for, if you can tell me”), he declares. But Mercury/Sosia does not even bat an eyelid: he recounts that in the tent there was a barrel of wine and that filling a bottle from it, he drank the entire thing. Sosia has lost and Mercury/Sosia remarks: *quid nunc? vincon’ argumentis te non esse Sosiam?* (“And so? Have I won or not, with these argumenta that you are not Sosia?”) The mechanisms are the same. A certain element (the knowledge of what happened privately in the tent during the battle) functions as a sign from which one can infer a certain conclusion, an inference that can then be used as proof for substantiating that which is not certain in itself precisely by means of that which is.

As the evidence of Plautus shows, the use of *argumentum* in the sense of “inferential sign” or “proof” is not the exclusive patrimony of orators and lawyers. It is also part of the common language and boasts of quite ancient testimony. This should come as no surprise, since what *argumentum* expresses—inference through signs, and the use of that inference as proof in situations of uncertainty—is a necessary part not only of forensic activity but also of life in general. Naturally, orators and lawyers give us the best “metalinguistic” analyses of the term. Yet, even more interesting than these precise definitions are certain images that they employ to describe the nature of *argumentum*. Take two passages of Cicero, for example: *argumentum . . . rerum vox est, naturae vestigium, veritatis nota* (“Argumentum is a voice of things, an imprint left by nature, a mark of truth”) and *haec causa ab argumentis, a coniectura, ab iis signis, quibus veritas inlustrari solet, ad testis*.
by the Minotaur’s “grim visage”; otherwise, it would never have been known. Vergil uses arguo in the same way in his rather sententious hemistich dege-
neres animos timor arguit (“Their fear revealed their base character”). It is their fear that allows the baseness of their character, normally imperceptible, to be revealed. A “grim visage” and fear, therefore, can fairly be defined argu-
menta, since they realize the process of arguere, since it is possible to infer from them the guilt of bestialitas in the first case and baseness of character in the second. That is to say, any element (a grim visage, fear) that has the ability to arguere what is immediately indiscernible (hidden culpability, the depths of human nature) functions as an argumentum.

Let us explore this problem a little further. In fact, let us try to deter-
mine if there is a more fundamental meaning from which these particular “designations” of arguo and argumentum (i.e., “to reveal, demonstrate,” and so on) are derived. One way to go about this is to examine how the adjective argūtus is used, since it is likewise related to arguo. As it turns out, in many cases the adjective argūtus indicates that which “strikes” the senses with particular force. When it is used in reference to auditory perception, for instance, argūtus accompanies the mention of a clear or penetrating sound. A tongue, a pipe, a swan’s song and so on, may all be said to be argūtus. Likewise with visual impressions: the eyes may be called arguti in reference to their capacity to reveal the feelings of the soul, just as the hands may be called argutae in reference to their expressiveness when gesticulating. Evidently, hands and eyes may “strike the attention” or somehow “stand out” in the same way that the sound of a reed pipe and a swan’s song do. The same is true also for smell and taste: the aroma of oil may be argūtus (we might say “sharp” or “penetrating”), just as the flavor of pears and figs

18. I use the terminology of Benveniste 1974, I, 5 and 80.
19. On the uses of this very useful adjective the survey of Iodice Martino 1986, 34ff.
20. Ernout and Meillet 1965, 46, s.v. arguo. Cf. the series such as status, statuo, statū-tus; tribus, tribuo, tribū-tus; cornū, cornū-tus.
22. Naevius, Tragediarum Fragmenta, fr. 25 Ribbeck3, arguti linguis (“with tongues that make themselves heard”).
24. Verg. Georg. 9.36, argutos inter strepere anser olores (“a duck that quacks among the swans of resonant song”).
25. Cic. Leg. 1.9.27, oculi nimis arguti, quamadmodum animo affecti simus, loquuntur (“very expressive eyes communicate the affections of the heart”).
26. Aul. Gell. NA. 1.5, manus argutae admodum et gestuosae (“very expressive hands inclined to gesticulate”). Cicero (De orat. 3.59.218) recounts that the manus of the orator is minus arguta, digitis subsequens verba, non expressens (“less expressive than that of the actor and accompanies the words with the movement of the fingers, but does not express them”).
may be argūtus\textsuperscript{28} (we would say “strong” or “sharp”). Argūtus, therefore, corresponds to the ability to strike the attention, to stand out, to be distinct.

It is worth examining the problem from an etymological point of view as well. Arguo, argumentum, argūtus are surely related to a form *argus, meaning “clarity” or “clearness”—the same root *arg- that we find in Greek argos (“clear, shining”) and in Hittite hargi (“clear, white”).\textsuperscript{29} In Latin, argentum (“shining metal”) and argilla (“white earth”) are also from this root.\textsuperscript{30} The form in -u-, as in *argu-, which forms the basis of argu-o, argumentum and argu-tus, appears in Greek argu-ros (“silver, shining metal”).\textsuperscript{31} The etymological meaning of this group of words seems to rest, then, in the image of clarity, of radiance. We can therefore explain why the adjective argūtus implies the notion of being sharp, penetrating and standing out. The original image is that of a “flash” of light that stands out from its surroundings and strikes the attention because of its brightness. But there is another consequence of this that interests us more directly. We know now that the ability possessed by words like arguo and argumentum to reveal something hidden is expressed through the image of a flash of light striking the attention, and Cicero, as we have seen, represented argumentum as a kind of “voice of things,” an “imprint of nature.” He was convinced that through an argumentum the truth is revealed by means of a “sign” or that from it the truth “receives light”—all images quite close to the original etymological meaning of the word. In short, when one adopts an argumentum—the ratio per ea quae certa sunt fidem dubiis aderens\textsuperscript{32}—a kind of flash is produced. An inference is a light that goes on, a beam of light that comes out of the darkness and strikes the attention.

### Iconographic Inference

Other specific uses of argumentum as “inference” are of particular interest in the history of the Roman intellectual lexicon: for example, those connected with iconography and the other figural arts, where argumentum is used to define a type of symbolic communication. In this regard, Pliny, in the last books of his Natural History, provides us with some of the best examples. Parrhasius was becoming famous for his representations of the people of Athens:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Palladius 3.25.4 and 4.10.26.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.vv. argumentum and arguo.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.vv. argentum and argilla.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.v. argentum.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Quint. Inst. orat. 5.10.8ff.
\end{itemize}
He painted the Athenian people making use of an ingenious argumentum. In fact, he represented it as flighty, irascible, unjust, inconstant, but at the same time embracing, indulgent, pitying; proud...sublime, humble, fierce and cheap, all in the same measure.

Wishing to represent the changeable nature of the Athenian people, Parrhasius resorted to an ingenious expedient, capturing in a single image several faces that expressed a variety of contrasting psychological dispositions.³⁴ Pliny defines this “pictorial device”³⁵ as an argumentum, and indeed we remain always in the realm of inference. In order to paint “something that is difficult to make concrete”—the shifting nature of a people’s character—Parrhasius availed himself of a complex of signs from which it was possible to infer what he wished to express.

Again according to Pliny, the artist Nealces does something similar when he finds himself needing to communicate something that would be difficult to express with the normal techniques of painting:

³³. Plin. Nat. hist. 35.69.
³⁵. This is the translation proposed by Mugellesi in Conte 1988, 367 (“risorsa pittorica”).
³⁶. Thus Ferri 1946, 155, comparing the word argumentum used by Pliny in this context with the Greek paradeigma.
³⁷. Plin. Nat. hist. 35.142.
very wide, resembling a sea more than a river, it was difficult to allow the viewer of the painting to understand that the expanse of water on which the battle took place belonged to a river and not to the sea. The painter therefore utilizes an argumentum—a complex of signs from which it would be possible to infer what his pictorial art was incapable of communicating on its own. On the litus of what appeared to be a sea, Neales painted an ass ambushed by a crocodile. Since the crocodile was an animal typical of the Nile (and definitely not a marine creature), this element rendered the waters immediately identifiable: the viewer would understand that it was a river and not the sea that was depicted there. The same may be said for the fact that an ass was represented in the act of drinking the water in front of it: obviously it is fresh water, rather than sea water, if the ass is drinking it. As for the painter’s specific choice of a donkey, it is likely that we have here an illusion to the fact that the king of Persia who was defeated in that battle, Artaxerxes III Ochos, had the surname Onos (“donkey”). At this point Neales’ argumentum quite resembles what we would call a rebus: a “donkey” (The Great King) ambushed by a “crocodile” (the Nile) functions as a kind of scholion—the king Artaxerxes III Ochos, called Onos, defeated by the Egyptians on the waters of the Nile)—transposed into the figural arts.

Another example. The Spartans Saura and Batracus built the temples that stood inside the Porticus Octaviae. Some maintained that they, being quite wealthy men, had financed the construction themselves in the hope of setting up an inscription that contained their names. This wish was denied. However, it seems that Saura and Batracus obtained their desire in any case: sunt certe etiamnum in columnarum spiris inscalptae nominum eorum argumento lacerta atque rana (“There can be seen even now a frog and a lizard carved into the torus of the columns as an argumentum of their names”). In Greek, saura means “lizard” and batrachos means “frog,” and affixing designs of these two animals to their work, Saura and Batracus had practically “signed” it—thus remedying in some way the absence of the inscription they so desired. Naturally, there is a difference. The inscription would have listed their names explicitly, whereas the carvings of a frog and a lizard could at best allow their names to be “inferred.” But for this reason, Pliny says that the two images functioned as an argumentum.

We could go on giving examples. However, it seems worth suggesting

38. Cf. Ael. Var. hist. 4.8; Ferri 1946, 202ff.
40. We know other cases of artists who used to “sign” their works with an image instead of their name. See, e.g., the case of the mosaicist Lucius Ceius Pavo who would sign his nomen and praenomen, but in place of his cognomen, would place the image of a peacock (cf. Conte 1988, 603).
41. Plin. Nat. hist. 29.54, the interlacing of serpents and their productive union in causa videtur esse, quare exterae gentes caduceum in pacis argumentis circumdata effigie anguimium fecerint (they put the
Chapter 8. Argumentum

that the term *argumentum* in the particular meaning we have identified here—“iconographic symbol”—could be useful in defining an aspect of figural communication for which we lack precise terminology. To see what I mean, let us take at random one of an infinite number of possible examples: Dosso Dossi’s *Allegory of Fortune.* In this painting, we see a nude woman framed by a fluttering veil, sitting atop a transparent ball (a kind of bubble of air) and holding a cornucopia. One of her feet is bare and on the other she wears a kind of shoe. In order to describe the functions of these iconographic elements we would probably have to use expressions like “symbol,” “sign,” “allegorical traits” or any number of other possibilities. In ancient terminology, however, all of these symbolic elements would have been defined as *argumenta,* since from them it is possible to infer the specific qualities of Fortune: her fragility (the air bubble upon which she sits), her erratic and uneven step (her feet, one shod, one bare) and so forth. Imitating Pliny’s Latin, we could say that *translucida bulla aere inflata argumentum est Fortunae levitatis,* while *pedes quorum unus calciatus alter nudatus argumenta sunt inconstantiae eius.* And given, then, that these *argumenta,* taken all together, allow us to infer the identity of the female figure of the painting, we could conclude that Dosso Dossi *Fortunam ingenioso quodam argumento pinxit:* *fecit enim eam translucida bulla sedentem.* . . . In this light, iconographic treatises like Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* are immense repositories of *argumenta.*

The “Many Meanings” of *Argumentum*

As Quintilian remarks, *argumentum* is a word that has “many meanings*:

*argumentum . . . plura significat. nam et fabulae ad actum scenaerum compositae argumenta dicuntur, et <cum> orationum Ciceronis uelut thema [ipse] exponit Pedianus inquit: ‘argumentum tale est’ (fr. 31 Ofen-

image of the serpents around the caduceus as an *argumentum* of peace); 35.101, regarding Protogenes who was supposed to have painted votive boats until he was fifty, *argumentum esse, quod cum Athenis celeberrimo loco Minervae delubri propylon pingeret . . . adiecriter parvolas naves longas in iis, quae pictores parergia appellant, ut appareret a quibus initiis ad arcem ostentationis opera sua pervenissent* (the *argumentum* of the presumed occupation of the ship painter were the small transport ships that he added as details when he painted the propylon of the temple of Minerva in Athens). In this case, too, *argumentum* designates a symbol from which one “infers” something: not an iconographic meaning, this time, but a (presumed) message encoded by the painter. Macr. *Sat.* 1.17.68, concerning a statue of Apollo at Hierapolis that combines all the attributes of the son, *hastae atque loricae argumento imago adiungitur Martis* (“the image of Mars is joined with an *argumentum* of a spear and cuirass”). Apul. *Met.* 11.3.4ff., above Isis’ brow stands a *plana rotunditas . . . argumentum lunae* (“flat disc . . . an *argumentum* of the moon”). And so on.

42. Conserved in the Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California.
loch) . . . quo appareat omnem ad scribendum destinatam materiam ita appellari. nec mirum, cum id inter opifices quoque sit uulgamum, unde Vergili ‘argumentum ingens,’ uulgoque paulo numerosius opus dicitur argumentosum.43

Argumentum has many meanings. In fact, the stories composed to be represented on stage are called argumenta, and when Pedianus gives the theme of Cicero’s orations he says, “the argumentum is as follows.” . . . From this, it ensues that any subject destined to be developed in written form is called by this name. And no wonder, given that this word is very popular among artists, whence the Vergilian “immense argumentum,” and that it is commonly said that a scattered work is an opus argumentosum.

Quintilian truly appreciates the problem. In fact, in Latin, argumentum is largely used in the sense of the “theme” or “subject” of a work—its “argument,” as we still say today44—and frankly in this instance the inferential character of the word seems entirely absent. The materia ad scribendum destinata (whether it is the subject of a comedy or of an oration, or forms the subject of a work of art, such as the story of Io carved on Turannus’ shield in Vergil), seems, at least at first glance, to have nothing to do with the flash of light that comes out of the darkness and causes what otherwise would have remained unknown to “stand out.” But let us take another look.45

The Subject of Figural Narration

There is no dearth of examples of argumentum referring to the subject of a work of art. Quintilian claims that this use was “very popular among art-

43. Quint. Inst. orat. 5.10.8–10.
44. Cf. TLL II, 548, 37ff.
45. As for the term argumentosus used by Quintilian (Inst. orat. 5.10.8) in the syntagma opus argumentosum to indicate a work that is disorganized, we may think here that what is being underscored is the excessive domination of the “subject” over its formal realization. Argumentosus is in fact a formation in -osus like famosus, ponderosus, damnosus, morbosus, vitiosus, etc., that underlines the strong predominance of a trait in characterizing something (Leumann 19772, 347, “reich an, versehen mit”; Ernout 1949; Guerrini 1984, 61ff.; Knox 1985, 90ff.). In different cases, the addition of the suffix -osus provokes formations with a marked negative sense: in Italian, they can be translated with the adjective troppo (“too”) as “too heavy” (ponderosus), “too talked-about” (famosus), “with too many vices” (vitosus), etc. Argumentosus would then mean “that has too many themes,” that is, without elegance because the theme dominates too much the form that it has received. The vision of a work of art presupposed by such terminology distinguishes clearly between content and form: one expects that the artists proceeds by giving form to a pre-existing “canvas,” rendering it argumentosus by means of his formal care. In the case of opera argumentosa this process of “giving form” has not been completed.
ists.” However, when the “subject” of a work of art is designated by the word *argumentum*, it always corresponds to a story—a narration of the kind that may be represented on a doorway, a shield, a bowl, a sail and so forth.\(^{46}\) Cicero recounts of Verres that *ex e bore diligentissime perfecta argumenta erant in valvis: ea detrhenda curavit omnia* (“on the doors stood some *argumenta* sculpted in ivory with great precision, all of which he had removed”).\(^{47}\) Meanwhile, in the passage to which Quintilian alludes above, Vergil describes the *imaginæ* that adorn Turnus’ shield like this:

leve clipeum sublatis cornibus Io
auro insignebat, iam setis obsita, iam bos
(argumentum ingens) et custos virginis Argus
caelataque amnem fundens pater Inachus urna.

In gold Io graced the smooth shield—her horns raised, covered in bristly hairs, already transformed into a cow (an impressive *argumentum*)—along with Argos, the girl’s guard and her father Inachus pouring forth his waters from an engraved urn.\(^{48}\)

There is also Ovid’s narration of the contest between Athena and Arachne, with his description of the haughty girl’s work: *et vetus in tela deducitur argumentum* (“an old *argumentum* is woven on the cloth”).\(^{49}\) The story represented is that of Europa seduced by the bull, along with other mythologi-

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\(^{46}\) Cf. *TLL* II, 550, 1ff. where, however, the two meanings of *argumentum*—as “iconographic symbol,” that discussed in paragraph 4, and as “subject,” or better, an artistically represented “narrative”—are confused.


\(^{48}\) Verg. *Aen.* 7.789ff. One notes, in fact, that in this regard Serv. in *Aen.* 7.791 makes a curious attempt to attribute an inferential value also to the *argumentum* named by Vergil in the case of Turnus’ shield: ‘*argumentum ingens* aut fabula, ut Cicero *argumenta in valvis aut re vera argumentum*, quod se Graecum probare cupiebat. hoc enim Amata superius dixit ‘Inachus Acrisiusque patres mediaeque Mycenae’ (‘*argumentum ingens*’ means either the subject, as when Cicero says, ‘on the doorway stood some *argumentum*’ or *argumentum* in its proper sense, because doing so he wished to show that he was Greek. Amata, in fact, had said this same thing before, ‘Inachus and Acrisius and the center of Mycenae are his ancestors.’”) We need to consider that Servius refers to the moment in which Amata declares that, if Lavinia strictly needs to find a foreign husband, Turnus also fits the bill. Consequently, the commentator suggests that Vergil had Turnus carry those images on his shield to ‘show’ his Greek origin. Vergil certainly did not mean this by his *argumentum*. Nevertheless, from a more general point of view, we cannot say Servius was wrong, either: in fact, Turnus does have this story on his shield, and not another, in order to declare his own origin. Servius is forcing the meaning of the text, taking advantage of the fact that in the story those images function objectively as an iconographic *argumentum* from which it is possible to “infer” the hero’s origins, in order to attribute the meaning of “inferential sign” to the word *argumentum* used by Vergil in the text; however, here it means something else.

Aeneas: fabricaverat Alcon / Myleus et longo caelaverat argumentum (“Alcon of Mylos had made it and upon it he had engraved a long argumentum”).

Many more examples could be given. But it is worth examining this final passage of Ovid in greater detail.

The scene represented by Alcon on the bowl is the war of the Seven Against Thebes. Ovid, that master of artistic description, ingeniously alerts his audience to what argumentum is engraved on the bowl when he writes that urbs erat et septem posses ostendere portas: / hae pro nomine erant et, quae foret illa, docebant (“there was represented a city—you could point out each of its seven gates, which stood in place of its name, and explained what city it was”) and later that ante urbem exsequiae tumulique ignesque rogique / effusaeque comas et apertae pectora matres / significant luctum (“before the city funerals, graves, flames, pyres, mothers with their hair let loose and their breasts bared indicate mourning”).

In some sense, Ovid pushes the limits of ekphrasis here: not limiting himself to merely describing a work of art, he also entertains himself in revealing how it functions. The reader is not given a description of the scene mediated—that is, already interpreted—by the poet, but is allowed to behold the bare figural elements. At the same time, the poet explains to him how to proceed in their interpretation. The peculiarity of Ovid’s method really stands out when compared with how Vergil goes about his description of Turnus’ shield. Vergil announces the “subject” of the work immediately, giving the names of the characters, and so on: there is Io, already transformed into a cow; there is Argus who watches over her, and Inachus who pours forth his waters from an urn. Ovid proceeds in reverse. He does not say “there was the city of Thebes with its seven gates; there were the Theban mothers in grief, with their hair let loose and their breasts bared.” Instead, he begins with what the reader/viewer actually sees, and only then invites him to guess the “subject” of the work. He describes a city with seven gates, saying that these gates stood for the city’s “name”; he represents funeral pyres, women with their hair let loose and their breasts bared, and only later declares that this “signifies” mourning.

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51. Prop. Carm. 3.9.13ff. (artists excel in art for various reasons, Lysippus for statues that appear to be alive, Calamis for having perfected the horse, etc.: argumenta magis sunt Menotis addita formae (the argumenta are, in a particular fashion, present in the casts of Mentor)—Mentor was considered the most illustrious of engravers; see also Suet. Tib. 44.2, Parrhasi quoque tabulam . . . legatam sibi sub condicione, ut si argumento offendertur decius pro ea sestertium acciperet (“a painting of Parrhasi . . . left to him on condition that if he was offended by the argumentum, he could receive a million sesterces instead”), etc. Ov. Met. 6.69.
Ovid is very true to life, since our enjoyment of figural narration works exactly in this way. In order to guess the subject of a work of art, the viewer makes inferences from the individual figural elements that he sees before him. If he does not have an interpreter to mediate this process for him—a poet to describe the work ecphrastically, *didaskalia*, a Touring Guide—the viewer must infer on his own that the city with seven gates is Thebes, that women with their hair let loose and their breasts bared must mean “mourning.” Only then does the subject of the scene become clear: the war of the Seven Against Thebes, which caused so much grief for those involved.

*Argumentum* therefore maintains its inferential character when it is used to indicate the subject of a work of the figural arts. In fact, what a viewer “really” has in front of him is simply a complex of incompletely codified signs: it is up to him to infer from them the “subject” represented there. For this reason, a story narrated by means of a figural code may rightfully be called an *argumentum*. The figural signs are “names,” elements that signify something—and the audience must use them as an *argumentum* to identify what it is they communicate.

### The Subject of a Literary Text

What about the *argumentum* of a comedy or an oration? When Mercury, in the prologue of *Amphitruo*, declares *nunc animum advortite / dum huius argumentum eloquar comoediae* (“now pay attention, so I can tell you the *argumentum* of this comedy”), the spectators know that what follows will be a narration: a summary of the comedy, its content. The same holds true for the summaries of Cicero’s orations that Quintus Asconius Pedianus supplies as a preface to his commentaries. There does not seem to be anything to infer here. Naturally, we might conclude that the use of *argumentum* to indicate the subject of a literary work is simply transferred from the figural arts. Quintilian tells us that the term *argumentum* was popular among *opifices*: We might not be surprised, then, if *argumentum*—used “properly” by artists to indicate the subjects of their own works—was then used “improperly” to define any type of theme or subject, even in the total absence of the inferential process. This explanation is not very convincing, however: we have seen that *argumentum* tends to maintain its relation to the world of signs and inference, even when this seems to be absent. But—to make a small play on words—we can actually use this observation as an *argumentum*

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of the fact that argumentum, even when it designates the subject of a literary text, maintains its connection to the semiotic sphere. At any rate, this “inference” can be confirmed by a simple consideration.

The argumentum of a literary work is not the work itself; it is a brief description of its contents. The play Amphitruo is one thing (a comedy by the playwright Plautus, recited on stage). The summary of its plot given in the prologue by Mercury is something else entirely. Suetonius even employs the verb explicare to describe the relationship between the plot (the “sketch” or “outline” of a play) and its realization on stage: parabatur et in noctem spectaculum, quo argumenta inferorum per Aegyptios et Aethiopas explicarentur (“a night time showing was also being prepared, in which the argumenta of the infernal beings were to be ‘performed’ by Egyptian and Ethiopian actors”).55 Likewise for the summaries of Cicero’s speeches: Asconius Pedianus does not pretend that his summaries are a substitute for the orations themselves: they are simply “sketches.” Only shameless students and unscrupulous professors would consider reading a summary of the Aeneid an acceptable substitute for reading the actual poem. A summary of the Aeneid is a tool—something that helps us get an idea of Vergil’s work, referring us back to the original. But it is something different from the work itself.

The inferential principle holding for the elements of a work of art realized by an opifex now appears to hold in the case of the argumentum of a literary work, as well—albeit in different form. From the summary of Amphitruo provided by Mercury in the play’s prologue, the spectator can only infer what the drama true and proper will be. Here again is that “flash of light” shining forth from the darkness: the subject of the comedy “stands out” through the argumentum. But the argumentum recited by Mercury is not the comedy itself; it is a complex of signs that permit the audience to know, in brief, the plot of the comedy about to see performed. So too for the speeches of Cicero summarized by Asconius Pedianus in the prefaces to his commentaries. Each argumentum is a sign that stands for and refers to the original work, allowing us to recall it. In some sense, it is a real pity that for us the “argument” of a work means simply its “topic” or “subject.” In normal linguistic perception, the semiotic value of “the summary” has in fact been lost: No one today would consider the CliffsNotes version of the Aeneid an argumentum from which it is possible to “infer” the epic poem written by Vergil.56

55. Suet. Cal. 57.10.
56. As the “summary” of a theatrical work or of any literary text, argumentum also bears the sense that we give to words such as “action,” “plot.” On the relationships between the send of argumentum as Inhaltsangabe of a work (the normal sense in Plautus and Terence) and as a “theme” to develop, cf. Primmer 1964, 61ff., esp. 64–65. On Cic. Inv. 1.27 and the problematic rhetoric connected to argumentum as “subject” of a work, above all in regard to the novel, see Barwick 1928,
The Apologue and Unlimited Semiosis

In one area of ancient literary production, the term argumentum seems to have enjoyed particularly good fortune: the Aesopic fable, the apologue. Already at the conclusion of Ennius’ celebrated “fable of the lark” we read: hoc erit tibi argumentum semper in promptum situm, / ne quid expectes amicos quod tute agere possies (“you will have this argumentum always at hand, so you don’t expect your friends to do what you can do yourself”). In Ennius’ opinion, this fable would be a good argumentum for sustaining a certain theory of behavior: namely, not expecting your friends to do what you can do yourself. Phaedrus frequently uses this word in a similar sense—for finding a “moral” in a fable, for showing the reader how he can apply what he has read to his own life. For example, take the story of the brigands who kill the mule that proudly carried their sacks of money, while sparing one that humbly carried sacks of barley: hoc argumento tuta est hominum tenuitas / magnae pericio sunt opes obnoxiae (“on the basis of this argumentum, men’s poverty is secure, while great wealth is subject to danger”). Or that of the viper that bites a file: mordaciorem qui improbo dente adpetit / hoc argumento se describi sentiat (“He who rashly bites that which is more biting than him should recognize that he himself is described here”). Or that of the thief who lights a lantern at the altar of Jupiter only to sack the temple by its light: quot res contineat hoc argumentum utiles, / non explicabit alius quam qui repperit: / significant primo . . . secundum ostendit . . . novissime interdicit . . . (“none can explain better than he who wrote this argumentum how many useful things are contained within it: in the first place, it means . . . in the second place, he shows . . . , and finally he warns . . . ”). Or that of the billy-goats who complain to Jupiter because he gave beards not only to them, but also to young she-goats: hoc argumentum monet ut sustineas tibi / habitu esse similes, qui sint virtute impares (“this argumentum warns us to accept that those who are unequal to us in worth are similar to us in aspect”). Or—finally—that of the bald man who hits himself over the head trying to swat a fly: hoc argumento ei modo decret veniam dari, / qui casu peccat (“on the basis of this argumentum, one should pardon he who does wrong involuntarily”).

261ff.

58. Phaed. Fab. 2.7.13ff.
59. Phaed. Fab. 4.8.1ff.
60. Phaed. Fab. 4.11.14ff.
61. Phaed. Fab. 4.17.7ff.
62. Phaed. Fab. 5.3.11ff.
In each case, *argumentum* refers directly to the fable—to its narrative. Thus, it is not a summary to which *argumentum* refers, but the text itself (even if the text of a fable is necessarily synthetic and brief). Of course, the Aesopic fable is a very special kind of text, since its chief purpose is not to entertain but to teach. It is a kind of apologue, a text that exists only to be immediately interpreted and turned into a concrete application on the moral plane. As Ennius says, a fable is an *argumentum* to keep on hand in order to avoid making a certain mistake. Phaedrus, as we have seen, goes on listing the various “morals” that may be gleaned from the fable/*argumentum* he has just recounted.63 This Roman use of *argumentum* to designate the paradigmatic and didactic power of the apologue is quite interesting. It is as if the conventional *ho muthos dēloi* of the Aesopic tradition has undergone a reversal of perspective, transformed into an explicit process of inference. It is not so much the fable that “reveals” certain truths (*ho muthos dēloi*), but rather the audience that must infer them (*argumentum*).64

In the case of Aesopic fable, then, the inferential meaning of *argumentum* remains apparent: the text is not so much valuable in itself as in the fact that something else may be inferred from it (a moral, a precept that can be immediately applied elsewhere). As an *argumentum*, a fable of the Aesopic tradition contains an explicit invitation to enlist its text in the process of unlimited semiosis.

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64. Moreover, it has been rightly noted that Phaedrus tends to attribute an explicitly “judicial” character to the structure of the Aesopic fable: Manetti 1987, 227ff. Cf. also Gibbs 1999.


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