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Poetic Pains and Pleasures: Theory of Mind and the Reception of Epic Performance (*Odyssey* 8 and Beyond)

Abstract: The contribution investigates aspects of literary reception in a combined aesthetic and cognitive framework. The first part is in-depth analysis of Odysseus' and Phaecians' contrasted receptions of Demodocus' performance in *Odyssey* 8, weeping and enjoyment respectively. The investigation expands on the cognitive processes presumably at work behind these reactions, namely Theory of Mind and embodied simulation. The joint analysis shows that an 'as-if procedures' applies both to ToM and simulation theory and aesthetic principles underlying Greek poetics.

Keywords: Embodied simulation; *Odyssey*; reception; Theory of Mind.

"The Homeric poems, and especially the *Odyssey*, have much to say about singers and audiences, and it is possible to construct from them a kind of *ars poetica*";[1] in this direction, the embedded performances of Demodocus at Scheria and Phemius at Ithaka, *Odyssey* 8 and 1 respectively, provide a privileged setting for reconstructing the conditions and premises for a successful performance and epic reception *iuxta propria principia.* In volume I of *Rethinking Orality* I focused on the embodied cognitive effects of poetic performance in the audience's reception, and identified the elicitation of silence, enchantment, and pleasure as the three interconnected goals of the performance. I have further investigated these states of mind from the cognitive point of view by means of neuroscientific findings, exploring in particular the role of silence as a trigger for attention and the function of pleasure-inducing dopamine circuits in relation to communication and acquisition of knowledge (epistemic curiosity).[2]

In this chapter I will focus on the two contrasted receptions of Demodocus' performance in *Odyssey* 8 by Odysseus and the Phaeacian audience respectively. The investigation expands on the cognitive processes behind the scenes, which will illuminate further aspects of literary reception in a combined aesthetic and cognitive framework.

1 Richardson 1993, 25.

2 Giordano 2022.

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1 Demodocus' Performance: a Spotlight on Poetics

In his perilous journey back to Ithaka, Odysseus ends up on the isle of the Phaeacians, where queen Arete and king Alcinous welcome the hero and treat him with hospitable rituals and offerings, framed in the typical scene of *xenia*.[3] The honorary banquet stars the singer Demodocus, who performs to the leisurely gathered elite community in honour of the yet nameless guest. Demodocus performs three songs: the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus (ll. 73–82), the loves of Aphrodite and Ares (ll. 266–366),[4] and the episode of the Wooden Horse, which is sung at Odysseus' bidding (ll. 499–520). Two of the performances are episodes from the Trojan Cycle, a common repertoire of the embedded stories of the *Odyssey*.[5]

In Book 8, however, the stories within the story acquire greater consequence: while the external audience knows that Odysseus features as the protagonist of the tales, the internal audience is unaware of his identity.[6] The resulting *mise en abyme* is a master's touch: not only are the stories within a story recursively embedded in the narration of the last *nostos* of the protagonist of the song, but they feature Odysseus at the same time as main addressee, character, and commissioner of the song for the episode of the Wooden Horse of both diegetic levels.[7]

Epic narrative art is shown here at its finest: multiple diegetic levels open diverse perspectives – Odysseus', Alcinous', Phaeacians', as well as the external audience's – resulting in a combination of irony and suspense. Such an assemblance

3 On which see Reece 1993; for the Scheria' scene see 102–121. The scholar dwells on the peculiarity of Phaeacians' hospitality, which, despite its lavish character, is not shorn of ambivalence, in so far as it is interrupted by breech of hospitable behaviours: Alcinous' probing into Odysseus' identity before the end of the meal (*Od.* 7. 186–225), the challenge to participate in athletic contests (8. 145–157), and Euryalus' offensive behaviours (*Od.* 8. 158–233), which sit oddly with the fame of the islanders proclaimed in 8.248 f. αἰεὶ δ᾽ ἡμῖν δαίς τε φίλη κίθαρις τε χοροί τε/ εἵματά τ᾽ ἐξημοιβὰ λοετρά τε θερμὰ καὶ εὐναί, "and ever to us is the banquet dear, and the lyre, and the dance, and changes of raiment, and warm baths, and the couch".

4 On which see Palmisciano 2012.

5 Cf. *Od.* 1.325–27; 3. 102–98, 247–312; 4. 76–112, 212–89, 347–586; 8. 73–82; 9. 1–12.453; 10. 14–16; 14. 462–506.

6 I prefer 'audience' to 'narratee', since the latter term takes only narration into account, whereas performance, epic or otherwise, entails more media than verbal art; see on the distinctive features of epic poetry Bakker 2009, Meineck in this volume.

7 See Létoublon 2022, 170–171; on poetological reflection, de Jong 2011, 11; see also Bierl 2022, in part. 296–301.

of viewpoints draws the external audience's attention to the discrepancy in poetic receptions, while creating a cognitive and emotional bond of shared secrecy with Odysseus as embedded character.

I will try to show that the enhanced aesthetic allure of the narration aimed at bringing more effectively to the fore the (meta)poetic bearing of the scene.

2 First Performance: the Quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus

The first performance revolves around a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (νεῖκος Ὀδυσσῆος καὶ Πηλεΐδεω Ἀχιλῆος, l. 75), which is said to fulfil Apollo's oracle about Zeus' destructive plans:

> *Od.* 8. 76–82
> ὣς ποτε δηρίσαντο
> ἐκπάγλοις ἐπέεσσιν, ἄναξ δ᾽ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων
> χαῖρε νόῳ, ὅ τ᾽ ἄριστοι Ἀχαιῶν δηριόωντο.
> ὣς γάρ οἱ χρείων μυθήσατο Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
> 80ΙΙυθοῖ ἐν ἡγαθέῃ, ὅθ᾽ ὑπέρβη λάινον οὐδὸν
> χρησόμενος: τότε γάρ ῥα κυλίνδετο πήματος ἀρχὴ
> Τρωσί τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς.
>
> even the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus, how once they strove with furious words at a rich feast of the gods, and Agamemnon, king of men, was glad at heart that the best of the Achaeans were quarrelling; for thus Phoebus Apollo, in giving his response, had told him that it should be, [80] in sacred Pytho, when he passed over the threshold of stone to enquire of the oracle. For then the beginning of woe was rolling upon Trojans and Danaans through the will of great Zeus.[8]

Hainsworth asserts that the dispute between the two heroes is "otherwise unknown",[9] and deems it unnecessary to interpret the mention of Zeus' plans (82) as an allusion to *Cypria*.[10] The hemistich 82 Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς strikingly parallels in phrasing the proem of the *Iliad* Διὸς δ᾽ ἐτελείετο βουλή (*Il.* 1. 5). As in the Iliadic proem, the *eris* between Agamemnon and Achilles (*Il.* 1.6–7) appears at the beginning of the epidemic that harvests lives in the Achaean camp, so in our passage the non-specified *neikos* between Achilles and Odysseus is the *arche* of a

8 All translations of the Odyssey are by A. T. Murray.
9 Hainsworth in Heubeck *et al. ad loc.*
10 Idem.

disaster falling upon Trojans and Danaans alike (74 s., κυλίνδετο πήματος ἀρχὴ/ Τρωσί τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι).[11]

In my opinion we can explain the stringent narrative analogy by assuming an alternative version of the wrath of Achilles, attested in Philostratus' *Heroicus*, where it is directed at Odysseus because of Palamedes' disgraceful murder at the hands of Diomedes and Laertes' son, also attested in the *Cypria:* "he [Protesilaus] also says that the wrath of Achilles did not fall upon the Hellenes because of the daughter of Khrysés, but that Achilles, too, was angry over Palamedes" (*Her.* 25. 16, transl. Maclean- Aitken).[12] Even if the reference to Palamedes' affaire remains speculative, we may at least be assured that at the time of the composition of *Odyssey* 8, the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus circulated as one of the major episodes of the Trojan Cycle, comparable to the episode of the Wooden Horse, so much so that the poet did not consider it necessary to provide further details.[13]

Revealingly, the passage describing Odysseus' emotional reaction to the performance extends across twice the space (83 – 95) of the allusion to the *neikos* episode (76 – 82), the discrepancy resulting in a foregrounding of the impressive hero's reaction:

Od. 8.83 – 95
ταῦτ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός: αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
πορφύρεον μέγα φᾶρος ἑλὼν χερσὶ στιβαρῇσι
κὰκ κεφαλῆς εἴρυσσε, κάλυψε δὲ καλὰ πρόσωπα:
αἴδετο γὰρ Φαίηκας ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυα λείβων.
ἦ τοι ὅτε λήξειεν ἀείδων θεῖος ἀοιδός,
δάκρυ ὀμορξάμενος κεφαλῆς ἄπο φᾶρος ἔλεσκε
καὶ δέπας ἀμφικύπελλον ἑλὼν σπείσασκε θεοῖσιν:
αὐτὰρ ὅτ᾽ ἂψ ἄρχοιτο καὶ ὀτρύνειαν ἀείδειν
Φαιήκων οἱ ἄριστοι, ἐπεὶ τέρποντ᾽ ἐπέεσσιν,

11 *Pace* Hainsworth who considers the plural βουλάς too vague.

12 I wish to thank Michele Lionetti, who pointed Philostratus' passage to me. Paus. 10. 31. 2, "Palamedes, as I know from reading the epic poem *Cypria*, was drowned when he put out to catch fish, and his murderers were Diomedes and Odysseus" (transl. Ormerod); in Hyg. *Fab*. 105, Palamedes is falsely accused of treason by Odysseus and stoned to death by the Greeks. See Grossardt 2006, 744 f. on the connection with "Achilles' song" (Phil. *Her.* 55, 3); cf. also *Her.* 25, 11 – 18; 33, 36.

13 Several questions should be further clarified: what moment of the expedition is referred to by τότε of line 81? Is the disaster Zeus' plans contrive connected to the narrative of *Cypria*, since it is said to befall both Trojans and Danaans? In such a case, why are the three leaders gathered in what seems a most important occasion, θεῶν ἐν δαιτὶ θαλείῃ? If Agamemnon's enjoyment of the rivalry between two of the greatest leaders is understandable in terms of the *divide et impera* principle, the sign of the beginning of the war may be a less straightforward cause of joy.

ἄψ Ὀδυσεὺς κατὰ κρᾶτα καλυψάμενος γοάασκεν.
ἔνθ' ἄλλους μὲν πάντας ἐλάνθανε δάκρυα λείβων,
Ἀλκίνοος δέ μιν οἶος ἐπεφράσατ' ἠδ' ἐνόησεν
ἥμενος ἄγχ' αὐτοῦ, βαρὺ δὲ στενάχοντος ἄκουεν.

as often as the divine minstrel ceased his singing, Odysseus would wipe away his tears and draw the cloak from off his head, and taking the two-handled cup would pour libations to the gods, But as often as he began again, and the nobles of the Phaeacians bade him sing, because they took pleasure in his lay, Odysseus would again cover his head and moan. Now from all the rest he concealed the tears that he shed, but Alcinous alone marked him and took heed, for he sat by him, and heard him groaning heavily.

While the Phaeacians take pleasure from the story and asks for more (90–91), Odysseus is overwhelmed by grief while the performance keeps bringing out in the hero a surge of tears and moaning (92–93, 95). Moments of singing alternate with moments of respite, during which commensals offer libations while Odysseus hides his face, drawing his purple cloak on his head, because, it is explained, he feels ashamed (αἴδετο) at showing before the Phaeacians (86). The sequence libation/concealment/despondent lament is conveyed as repeatedly taking place by the use of the inchoative form of the verbs (88, σπείσασκε; 89, ἔλεσκε; 92, γοάασκεν). Odysseus' enduring grief escapes the other commensals (89–90), except Alcinous, who, seated beside his guest, hears his sobs. The king immediately interrupts the performance by diverging the attention of the Phaeacians, which he invites to move outside for the next entertainment, the athletic contests (96–103).

3 Third Performance: the Guile of the Wooden Horse and Odysseus as a Widow

Before exploring Demodocus' third performance, let us take a short detour on the anthropological status of crying in Homer. The subject of tears in ancient Greece and Homer in particular was famously tackled by Monsacré's seminal study, *The Tears of Achilles*, and has continued to receive scholarly attention ever since.[14] Suffice it to say that in Homer weeping is a widespread emotional and nonverbal habit among heroines and heroes alike. Tears are ostensibly shed in both public and private contexts, and it is the lack of restraint Homeric warriors display in weeping that Plato deemed so disgraceful and morally corrupting as to propose

14 See for ex. van Wees 1998; Tsagalis 2004; Fögen 2009. On tears as an unmanly expression in post-Homeric literature see Holst-Warhaft 1992, 107–108; van Wees 1998; Föllinger 2009b.

that epic should be banned from his ideal community (*Resp.* 3. 287–288).[15] Since in Homer no sense of shame accompanies weeping *per se*, the reasons for Odysseus hiding his weeping as well as the alarming reaction that this elicits in Alcinous, therefore, shall be examined more precisely.

Demodocus' third performance takes place after the evening banquet and culminates the ritual delivery of hospitable presents, the bathing, and the exchange of blessings (ll. 389–445). At the closing of the meal, Odysseus addresses Demodocus, praising him as a 'master of truth',[16] and challenges him to probe his valour (496–498) and develop the *oime* of the Wooden Horse:

> *Od.* 8. 492–495
> ἀλλ᾽ ἄγε δὴ μετάβηθι καὶ ἵππου κόσμον ἄεισον
> δουρατέου, τὸν Ἐπειὸς ἐποίησεν σὺν Ἀθήνῃ,
> ὅν ποτ᾽ ἐς ἀκρόπολιν δόλον ἤγαγε δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
> ἀνδρῶν ἐμπλήσας οἳ ῥ᾽ Ἴλιον ἐξαλάπαξαν
>
> sing of the building of the horse of wood, which Epeius made with Athena's help, the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile, [495] when he had filled it with the men who sacked Ilios.[17]

The song of Demodocus as embedded narrator is artfully epitomized by the primary narrator of *Odyssey* 8 and acts as an *Iliou persis* in a nutshell (500–520). The words of the performance, however, are not directly quoted, as prescribed by the poetic rule Palmisciano has highlighted: "the singer should neither quote verbatim epic songs of other singers nor traditional lyric songs".[18]

Here too, however, Demodocus' excellence proves a most unwelcome gift to Odysseus, and, as in the first performance, Odysseus experiences an emotional breakdown:

> *Od.* 8. 521–522
> ταῦτ᾽ἄρ᾽ἀοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός: αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
> τήκετο, δάκρυ δ᾽ ἔδευεν ὑπὸ βλεφάροισι παρειάς.
>
> This song the famous minstrel sang. But the heart of Odysseus
> was melted and tears wet his cheeks beneath his eyelids.

15 On the tears of the heroes, see Monsacré 2018, 159–167.

16 See Sbardella 2022, 153; Palmisciano in this volume.

17 See Suerbaum 1968; Doherty 1995; Palmisciano in this volume.

18 Palmisciano 2012, 177; the scholar further explains that "this law finds its raison d' être in the practice of oral composition, which demands that one should not repeat from memory … but requires the singer to compose anew each time".

A dramatic simile illustrates Odysseus' state of wretchedness:

Od. 8. 523 – 531
ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίῃσι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα
ὅς τε ἑῆς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσῃσιν,
ἄστεϊ καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύνων νηλεὲς ἦμαρ:
ἡ μὲν τὸν θνήσκοντα καὶ ἀσπαίροντα ἰδοῦσα
ἀμφ' αὐτῷ χυμένη λίγα κωκύει: οἱ δέ τ' ὄπισθε
κόπτοντες δούρεσσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὤμους
εἴρερον εἰσανάγουσι, πόνον τ' ἐχέμεν καὶ ὀιζύν:
τῆς δ' ἐλεεινοτάτῳ ἄχεϊ φθινύθουσι παρειαί:
ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβεν.

And as a woman wails and flings herself about her dear husband,
who has fallen in front of his city and his people,
seeking to ward off from his city and his children the pitiless day;
and as she beholds him dying and gasping for breath,
she clings to him and shrieks aloud, while the foe behind her
smite her back and shoulders with their spears,
and lead her away to captivity to bear toil and woe,
while with most pitiful grief her cheeks are wasted:
even so did Odysseus let fall pitiful tears from beneath his brows.

The son of Laertes is compared to a widow, victim of the war, by a most pathetic simile that utterly collapses gender division, and inverts roles and perspectives. Before we turn to the pragmatic context of the scene, let us dwell at the multilayered semantics of the simile.

At first glance, the simile compares the intensity of the woman's crying with that of Odysseus, as in *Il.* 2. 289 – 290, where the Achaeans wail in their longing to homecoming "like little children or widow women", ὥς τε γὰρ ἢ παῖδες νεαροὶ χῆραί τε γυναῖκες. According to de Jong, "the point of comparison, as so often in Homer, is 'advertised' through the verbal echo of 'most pitiable' (*eleeinotatōi*) in 'piteous' (*eleeinon*): the weeping of Odysseus/the woman is such as to evoke the pity of those who see them, and indeed Alcinous is moved by the stranger's tears and once again inquires after his 'sorrow'".[19] The cause of the woman's weeping is the witnessing of her husband's violent killing and the prospect of a life as a slave, "an idea which, even when expressed without pathos, cannot help but be emotive".[20]

In other terms, it is the intensity of the woman's crying in the foreground, *not* the femininity of it; the point at stake in the simile, in other words, is pathos, not

19 De Jong 2018, 39.
20 Griffin 1976, 173.

gender.[21] Homer foregrounds women's subjectivity in expressing painful emotions, partly because "it is in women that the drama of the fall of the city is most fully expressed" and their weeping as victims of warfare is "a paradigm of the pathos of war";[22] the encounter of Andromache and Hector (*Il.* 6 407–413) exemplifies this epic motif.[23] The context of our simile, however, expands this commonplace and makes us pause. Segal remarks that:

> the simile of the weeping captive woman further suggests the possibility that this identification with the subject matter of the song applies not just to the memory of an actual participant like Odysseus, but also to vicarious participation by anyone, for the simile evokes a response of pity for the victims of any war, not just the Trojan war of which Demodocus has just sung.[24]

As often noted, the *Odyssey*, and *nostoi* in general, looked at the Trojan war with hindsight, and trauma rather than glory emerges in the narrative; in this direction, Odysseus' reaction speaks volume about "the breaking points" connected to the experience of war.[25]

Odysseus has just been celebrated in Demodocus' song as the agent par excellence of civic destruction, killing and wreaking havoc in the city "like Ares" (515), performing the exploit that the epithet πτολίπορθος "sacker of the city" aptly epitomises[26]. Interestingly, the heroic standing and civic martial virtues of the woman's husband are highlighted, a civic defender that dies at the hands of the city.[27] On further reflection, the juxtaposition of these subjects is altogether both poignant and puzzling: the perpetrator weeps just like one of his (potential) vic-

21 See, *contra*, Cairns 2009, 43, arguing that "the simile requires for its effect a sense that weeping is a typically feminine response", and "the implication that a veiled and weeping man is like a woman is impossible to overlook". On the pragmatic reasons for Odysseus 'veiling' see below.

22 Leandro 2022, 39.

23 In this passage Andromache fears the fate of the like of the woman in our simile, cf. *Il.* 6. 464–465; for *loci similes* cf. 9. 593–594; 16. 833–834; 19. 291–295; 22. 59–71.

24 Segal 1992, 10.

25 Shay 1994, 165–181. See also pp. 188–94 on the need veterans experience for storytelling and sharing their grief. See Konstan / Meineck 2014. Hainsworth in Heubeck *et al. ad loc.* notes "heroic exploit is for Homer always an ἄεθλος leading to no permanent happiness".

26 Hainsworth in Heubeck *et al. ad loc.*; whereas the epithet refers also to Achilles, Ares, Enyo, and others, in the *Odyssey* the epithet only applies to Odysseus.

27 On the profile of the civic martial valour, see Scully 1990, 94–112; Giordano 2006, 291–292.

tim;[28] the war victim and the war hero stand side by side, his deed her tragedy, in a bitter yet mesmerizing game of mirrors.[29]

As noted by Hainsworth, weeping can express a wide range of emotions, from fear to piety, "but none exactly fit the case of a man who weeps at the recollection of victory".[30] What does Odysseus weep for exactly? Demodocus' storytelling brings painful memories that overpower the hero's self-control, resonant with a traumatic echo, to be sure; still, the simile's mourning theme, and particularly the violent denial of funerary rites, is particularly relevant in this respect. Odysseus is "in a sense, mourning himself", not only is he far from home (cf. *Il.* 2. 289 s. quoted above), but he already knows that he will die in a far-away land.[31]

Neither Odysseus nor the woman can openly and fully express their funereal weeping: the woman is impaired by external factors, i. e. her enemies, who hit her with the spears, dragging her away to a destiny of slavery, while Odysseus seems impaired by an internal factor, his own sense of shame and self-censorship. If, as I have noted, weeping is nothing eccentric for a Homeric hero, why does Odysseus desperately try to hide it from the Phaeacians? The answer, I believe, lies between epic poetics of reception and *xenia*'s ritual etiquette.

4 Concealing One's Tears: between Poetics and *Xenia*

At the realization of his guest's weeping, Alcinous twice commands that the song be stopped:

Od. 8. 531–542
ὣς Ὀδυσεὺς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβεν.
ἔνθ᾽ ἄλλους μὲν πάντας ἐλάνθανε δάκρυα λείβων,
Ἀλκίνοος δέ μιν οἶος ἐπεφράσατ᾽ ἠδ᾽ ἐνόησεν,
ἥμενος ἄγχ᾽ αὐτοῦ, βαρὺ δὲ στενάχοντος ἄκουσεν.
535αἶψα δὲ Φαιήκεσσι φιληρέτμοισι μετηύδα:
κέκλυτε, Φαιήκων ἡγήτορες ἠδὲμέδοντες,

28 Pucci 1998, 5–6, see also n. 8, p. 5. See also Carastro 2006, 135–136; Brillante 2009, 30: "l'emozione dell'eroe è qui dovuta al forte coinvolgimento negli eventi oggetto del canto. Come nel caso di Penelope, la storia, [...] tocca troppo da vicino chi ascolta perché sia materia di semplice intrattenimento. Sul diletto prevalgono allora timore e angoscia".

29 Arnauld 1990, 102, "on ne saurait dire qu'elles en relèvent vraiment".

30 Hainsworth in Heubeck *et al. ad loc.*

31 Minchin 2001, 208; see also de Jong 2018, 40. On the funerary connotation of weeping and veiling see Cairns 2009.

Δημόδοκος δ᾽ἤδη σχεθέτω φόρμιγγα λίγειαν:
οὐ γάρ πως πάντεσσι χαριζόμενος τάδ᾽ἀείδει.
ἐξ οὗ δορπέομέν τε καὶ ὥρορε θεῖος ἀοιδός,
540ἐκ τοῦ δ᾽οὔ πω παύσατ᾽ὀιζυροῖο γόοιο
ὁ ξεῖνος: μάλα πού μιν ἄχος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν.
ἀλλ᾽ἄγ᾽ὁ μὲν σχεθέτω, ἵν᾽ὁμῶς τερπώμεθα πάντες

even so did Odysseus let fall pitiful tears from beneath his brows. Now from all the rest he concealed the tears that he shed, but Alcinous alone marked him and took heed, [535] for he sat by him and heard him groaning heavily. And straightway he spoke among the Phaeacians, lovers of the oar:
"let Demodocus now check his clear-toned lyre, for in no wise to all alike does he give pleasure with this song. Ever since we began to sup and the divine minstrel was moved to sing, from that time on stranger has never
ceased from sorrowful lamentation; surely, grief has encompassed his
heart. Nay, let the singer cease, that we may all make merry, hosts and guest".

Reece views the scene as a clue to the ambiguity of Odysseus' welcome: "it is significant that the Phaeacians bungle in the entertainment of their guest: the songs of Demodocus, intended for his pleasure, instead twice bring him to tears (8. 83 – 95, 521 – 534)".[32] Alcinous, however, accounts for his order by a clear poetic argument. Giving pleasure is explicitly asserted as the goal and *sine qua non* of performance, which should be gratifying for *all* hearers (536); contrariwise, Demodocus' story has brought a continuous mourning and grief to the guest (542) and therefore should cease (544).

In response to a poetic performance, weeping immediately signals a dystonic fracture of the horizon of expectation and a transgression of the general rule of epic reception, which foresees pleasurable emotions, *terpsis*, as the benchmark of effective and captivating poetic performance.[33]

At the same time, the typical scene of hospitality further illuminates Odysseus' behaviour and the reasons for concealing his weeping from the ritual point of view:

1 weeping will impolitely show that the welcoming gift of the performance is in fact unwelcome;

2 his tears will elicit suspicion and guesses about his identity, anticipating inappropriately the identification.

That the hero's reason for hiding lies mainly in the fear of being recognised sooner than the etiquette of hospitality dictates is confirmed by another scene of *xenia.* In *Odyssey* 4, Telemachus arrives with Pisistratus, son of Nestor, at Mene-

32 Reece 1993, 107.

33 See Giordano 2022, part. 182 – 183.

laus' court in Sparta to seek news of his father. As is customary in the ritual of *xenia*, the Atreid king receives the young men and offers them a banquet, *before* inquiring about their identities: "a proper host requests his guest's name and inquiries into his business only after providing him a meal; the stranger is to remain anonymous throughout the meal".[34] However, during the banquet, Menelaus speaks of Odysseus with heartrending affection and nostalgia, going as far as mentioning Telemachus by name:

> *Od.* 4. 110–116
> ζώει ὅ γ' ἦ τέθνηκεν· ὀδύρονταί νύ που αὐτὸν
> Λαέρτης θ' ὁ γέρων καὶ ἐχέφρων Πηνελόπεια
> Τηλέμαχός θ', ὃν ἔλειπε νέον γεγαῶτ' ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.
> ὣς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἄρα πατρὸς ὑφ' ἵμερον ὦρσε γόοιο.
> δάκρυ δ' ἀπὸ βλεφάρων χαμάδις βάλε πατρὸς ἀκούσας,
> χλαῖναν πορφυρέην ἄντ' ὀφθαλμοῖιν ἀνασχὼν
> ἀμφοτέρῃσιν χερσί.
>
> Mourned must he be by the old man Laertes, and by steadfast Penelope, and by Telemachus, whom he left a newborn child in his house."
> So he spoke, and in Telemachus he roused the desire to weep for his father. Tears from his eyelids he let fall upon the ground, when he heard his father's name, and with both hands held up his purple cloak before his eyes.

The similarities between the two scenes are striking: Demodocus recounts emotionally charged episodes featuring Laertes' son, while Menelaus recalls the intense sorrow felt by himself and the Odysseus' family over the hero's uncertain and mournful fate; Menelaus still does not know he has in front of him Odysseus' son, just as the Phaeacians are unaware of Odysseus' identity. For both Odysseus and Telemachus hearing their misfortunes recounted by an unwitting narrator triggers an uncontrollable emotional reaction and they are both overcome with tears. At this point, both hide the tears that the stories have brought to their eyes, for fear that their weeping will reveal their identities before they can properly introduce themselves. In fact, untimely identification is a faux pas in Homeric typical scene of hospitality:

> the revelation of a guest's identity is perhaps the most critical element in the development of a relationship of *xenia* (...). It is understandable, then, that the manner in which a guests's name is requested and revealed takes on an almost ritualistic formality.[35]

34 Reece 1993, 26; see also pp. 25–28. As Gainsford 2003, 44 notes, this part of the hospitality scene overlaps with the recognition scene.
35 Reece 1993, 26 also remarks that "the *anagnorisis* of the visitor is slowly worked out, creating rich dramatic irony".

Father and son perform the same gesture: they "veil" themselves, drawing their cloak before their eyes (*Od.* 8. 85, 92; *Od.* 4. 115–116).

The heroes unexpected tears lead both Alcinous and Menelaus to inquire into their guests' identity, Menelaus' reaction, moreover, clearly expresses the ritual embarrassment caused by Telemachus' crying (*Od.* 4. 116–119):

> νόησε δέ μιν Μενέλαος,
> μερμήριξε δ' ἔπειτα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,
> ἠέ μιν αὐτὸν πατρὸς ἐάσειε μνησθῆναι
> ἦ πρῶτ' ἐξερέοιτο ἕκαστά τε πειρήσαιτο.
>
> And Menelaus noted him, and debated in mind and heart whether he should leave him to speak of his father himself, or whether he should first question him and test him in each thing.

We can therefore conclude that in both cases crying is concealed not *per se*, but as a 'detector' of an identity that should not be revealed yet for ritual and pragmatic reasons; from the viewpoint of poetic reception, crying confirms *e contrario* the rule of poetic pleasure.[36]

5 Simulation Theory, ToM, and Phaeacians' Point of View

Segal has argued that:

> through these contrasting responses, Homer reveals the paradox (...) between the pleasure that mimetic art affords its audience and the pain in its contents. For the hedonistic Phaeacians, war itself is absorbed into *aoidé*, song (8. 580); for Odysseus the sufferings of war, even in song, are still sufferings and brings tears.[37]

In my opinion, the contrast lies in the position and relative distance the audience takes vis-à-vis that content. This we may better understand by expanding our investigation on the cognitive process presumably behind Phaeacians' and Odysseus' represented states of mind and the differences in their unequal poetic receptions, and ultimately behind poetic reception in general.

We may surmise that the Phaeacians stand as average members of the audience at a performance, who hear the stories, imagine, and understand them

36 Segal 1992, 197.
37 Idem, 10.

through a process of identification involving the ability that narratology defines "mind-reading",[38] that in cognitive terms we can better apprehende via two main synergic systems, namely the mentalizing system (MENT) or "Theory of Mind" (ToM) and the mirror neuron system (MNS).[39]

Located in the "mentalizing network", and developed around the age of four, ToM defines our ability to understand emotional and mental states of other people in a recursive representation, thanks to which "we normally understand readily four levels of embedded intentionality (you *doubt* that Brian *accepts* that Lisa *knows* what Robin *says*)";[40] ToM applies not only when we interact with real people, but also when we imagine interactions between fictional characters. Yeshurun *et al.* have shown that "understanding interactions between characters in a story activates many brain regions, including regions implicated in thinking about the mental states of other people".[41]

As it has been argued, ToM is highly relevant to ancient theatre:

> watching and understanding drama is a mimetic version of Theory of Mind, where we are expected as audience members to try to understand and predict the motivation of the characters before us.[42]

Budelmann and Easterling have argued that:

> at the core of drama—and indeed of literature more broadly—lies its continual engagement with the very same mind-reading faculties that spectators and readers habitually employ in real life.[43]

In relation to our case study, ToM not only accounts for the Phaeacians' ability to enjoy Demodocus' performance, but also for king Alcinous' understanding of Odysseus' state of mind – and, recursively, Odysseus' mind-reading of both the Phaeacians and Alcinous. Conversely, thanks to their mentalizing system, the external audience can figure out and appreciate the discrepancy between the internal audience's false belief about the unknown guest and his actual identity, which

38 See Currie 2022, 148 "the narratee, like the characters themselves, needs to make mentalistic attributions"; see also De Jong 2018, 36. On reading minds see Easterling / Budelmann 2010.
39 The connection between these two systems is as yet under investigation, see Ciaramidaro / Toppi / Vogel *et al.* 2024.
40 Boyd 2006, 590; on Theory of Mind see Premack / Woodruff 1978; Wellman 2018; on ToM and fiction see now Curry 2025.
41 Yeshurun / Swanson / Simony 2017, 1; see also Mar 2011, with a metanalysis.
42 Meineck 2017, 167.
43 Budelmann / Easterling 2010, 292.

is further conducive to understanding why Odysseus cannot enjoy Demodocus' performances when dealing with his own memories.

6 'Feeling with' but Keeping the Distance: Embodied Simulation and Poetic Reception

Neuroscience has mapped our connected capacity to simulate and identify with other people's feelings and emotions 'as if' we were them, in terms of "simulation theory", developed in connection with the discovery of mirror neurons by the team of Rizzolatti, Gallese *et al.*[44] These neurons form the complex mechanism of *embodied simulation*, an embodied system that allows us to 'feel with' the other person[45] and connects us to each other at a "pre-intentional and pre-linguistic level".[46] Simulation or mirror-neuron system provides the corporeal, neurophysiological correspondence of our capacity to identify with other people's actions and emotions; poised at the core of human interactions, the system has great adaptive advantages:

> however we acquired it in the course of evolution, the mirror system represents our ability to enter the minds of others by means of social emotions or empathic emotions, which allow us to grasp the intentions of individuals in society.[47]

These overall cognitive competencies enable us to understand and identify other people's emotions, intentions, and states of mind by adopting their perspective, simulating them to ourselves, and accounting for our interlaced cognitive activities of mind-reading, simulation, as-if thinking under a common framework.[48]

Simulative and mind-reading abilities are not only crucial for human interactions in general, but they are also conspicuously relevant for literary studies in

44 Mirror neurons are located in the premotor cortex and function as simulators of the movements that we observe in another agent, acting as a "bridge between the observer and the actor", and are at the centre of imitative behaviours, whereby we imagine and anticipate actions regardless of their actual performance. Gallese / Fadiga / Fogassi/ Rizzolatti 1996; Rizzolatti / Craighero 1996; for the theory of simulation; see now Bonini /Rotunno / Arcuri / Gallese 2022. For the relevance of mirror neurons in poetic theory, see Nicolai in this volume.

45 Gallese 2005, Gallese / Cuccio 2015.

46 Gallese / Morelli 2024, 60; see also p. 33. As the scholars clearly highlight, this means that what we term as "empathy" is not a choice, the choice being rather what we do with the recognition of our similarity to other human beings.

47 Attanasio / Oliverio (2012), 81.

48 Gallese / Goldman 1998.

general and reception studies in particular, theatre and epic performance alike. They underscore the ability of poets to understand their audience as well as the audience's capacity to enjoy all sorts of storytelling and dramatical performances, as *Odyssey* 8 masterfully reflects.[49]

A recent interdisciplinary experimental study conducted by Budelmann *et al.* investigates the audience's response to a tragic story – in the experiment a sad film -, and the role of endorphins; interestingly, the study is conducive to a similar conclusion on the role of identification in the enjoyment of the story: "the causal chain is from identification to enjoyment: the more appealing, believable, and relevant we find the characters, the more we enjoy the film".[50]

As far as our passages are concerned, the embodied simulation perspective enables us to better understand why the Phaeacians as non-involved audience can share the pleasure of an epic performance: they do identify themselves with the characters of the stories, yet from a safe distance. Similarly, we can also appreciate why, unlike them, Odysseus cannot enjoy the performance, unable to distance himself from the events evoked while Demodocus' deft storytelling emotionally retrieves past memories, the trauma of the carnage, the longing for home. Admittedly he asked for it, but he did not anticipate how vividly and precisely Demodocus' storytelling skills would lead him to recall his memories. As Minchin suggests, although 'personal relatedness' can be a factor of interest in successful communication, there is

> a level of 'personal relatedness' which makes the telling of a story so engaging that it is too painful to hear. This is when the story concerns ourselves or people close to us and the experience being narrated has not yet been resolved in the real world.[51]

In the same vein, Segal argues that

> the scene articulates two very different modes of response: the aesthetic distance of Alcinous that can treat poetry (fiction) as pure object of pleasure (*terpsis*), and the intense, painful involvement of Odysseus as he participates, through memory in the suffering of war, that are the subject matter of the song.[52]

The interplay between memory and imagination, distance and closeness plays a crucial role: for an audience to enjoy a story, a certain distance is needed; the events can be close, but not so close as to elide the border between tale and mem-

49 Ruffel 2008 and Palmisciano in this volume.
50 Budelmann / Dunbar / Duncan *et al.* 2017, 241.
51 Minchin 2001, 208.
52 Segal 1992, 13.

ory. When this distance collapses, the audience of the performed story becomes the character *in* the story, tale turns into recalling, identification into identity, and, from the cognitive perspective, the simulative process aborts and turns instead into memory retrieval, which utterly impairs the enjoyment of the performance.

The question of distance tallies with the functioning of both the mirror neuron system and ToM. In both systems, a second parallel and interrelated competence is engrained, namely the distinct awareness that the observer and the actor are two separate persons: even though I know that the states of mind I observe or imaginatively represent are real, I am simultaneously aware that the person experiencing them is somebody else, is *not* me. Both ToM and embodied simulation therefore assume a relationship of *similarity*, not *identity*, between the two actors involved in these processes: "there is always a relationship of similarity and never identity between these two conditions of brain activation".[53]

As a result, I can be moved and feel extremely sad for the other person's sorrows, I can 'feel with' but I still feel *as-if*, all the while knowing this is happening to another being, not myself. Both aesthetic and cognitive distance are therefore preconditions for understanding, enjoyment, and proper reception of other people's stories. In epic poetics, if such involvement is painful and not pleasurable, aesthetic communication fails its end and must cease.

We can view under the same framework the other instance of misfired poetic communication the *Odyssey* portrays, Phemius' performing for the Suitors gathered in the hall of Odysseus' palace, singing the "woeful return (*nostos*) of the Achaeans" (*Od.* 1. 325–326). While the usurping princes receive the stories of the homecoming of Greek warriors with appreciative silence (325), hoping it may forebode a similarly woeful return for Odysseus,[54] the last of the Trojan veterans still engaged in his *nostos*, Penelope reacts with grief and addresses the singer in tears:

Od. 1. 336–344
δακρύσασα δ᾽ ἔπειτα προσηύδα θεῖον ἀοιδόν:
Φήμιε, πολλὰ γὰρ ἄλλα βροτῶν θελκτήρια οἶδας,
ἔργ᾽ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε, τά τε κλείουσιν ἀοιδοί:
τῶν ἕν γέ σφιν ἄειδε παρήμενος, οἱ δὲσιωπῇ
340οἶνον πινόντων: ταύτης δ᾽ἀποπαύε᾽ἀοιδῆς
λυγρῆς, ἥ τέ μοι αἰεὶ ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλον κῆρ
τείρει, ἐπεί με μάλιστα καθίκετο πένθος ἄλαστον.

53 Gallese-Morelli 2024, 37.
54 See Giordano 2022, 177–179.

τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ποθέω μεμνημένη αἰεί,
ἀνδρός, τοῦ κλέος εὐρὺ καθ᾽Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος.

"Phemius, many other things thou knowest to charm mortals, deeds of men and gods which minstrels make famous. Sing them one of these, as thou sittest here, and let them drink their wine in silence. But cease from this woeful song which ever harrows the heart in my breast, for upon me above all women has come a sorrow not to be forgotten. So dear a head do I ever remember with longing, even my husband, whose fame is wide through Hellas and mid-Argos."[55]

The scene of Phemius' song matches the pattern of Demodocus' performance: the content of the song retrieves Penelope's heartrending nostalgia for her husband and fear for his fate, to which she reacts with painful tears – as Odysseus does in reaction to Demodocus' songs; the queen requests Phemius to cease from his song, as Alcinous does Demodocus in book 8. In this case too, the storytelling fails to maintain "the distance between the subject and its audience", and weeping signals unsuccessful poetic communication, the rupture of the implicit alliance between singer and audience, according to which the vicissitudes brought to life so vividly should be distant tales and not real-life experiences.[56]

After reflecting on Odysseus' reaction to Demodocus' performances, Alcinous inquiries about his guest's connection with the war of Troy, the subject matter of Demodocus' songs, and asks:

Od. 8. 580 – 585
ἦ τίς τοι καὶ πηὸς ἀπέφθιτο Ἰλιόθι πρὸ
ἐσθλὸς ἐών, γαμβρὸς ἢ πενθερός, οἵ τε μάλιστα
κήδιστοι τελέθουσι μεθ᾽ αἷμά τε καὶ γένος αὐτῶν;
ἦ τίς που καὶ ἑταῖρος ἀνὴρ κεχαρισμένα εἰδώς,
585ἐσθλός; ἐπεὶ οὐ μέν τι κασιγνήτοιο χερείων
γίγνεται, ὅς κεν ἑταῖρος ἐὼν πεπνυμένα εἰδῇ.

Did some kinsman of thine fall before Ilios, some good, true man, thy daughter's husband or thy wife's father, such as are nearest to one after one's own kin and blood? Or was it haply some comrade dear to thy heart, some good, true man? For no whit worse than a brother is a comrade who has an understanding heart".

Alcinous' remarks imply that only a close personal affinity to the story would account for Odysseus' miserable weeping.

55 Cf. *Od.* 1. 351 – 352.
56 Minchin 2001, 208.

7 My Story is Mine to Sing

Epic storytelling as represented in the poems respects therefore a basic poetic rule: the characters of the stories should not identify with a real person present in the audience nor with one strictly connected to them, *unless* the narrator and the protagonist be the same person: the last poetic rule emerging from the setting of the *Odyssey*. At the beginning of book 9, Odysseus responds to Alcinous' invitation to reveal himself and his story. In the first part of his speech, Odysseus defines the communal enjoyment of epic performance in a festive setting not only as τέλος χαριέστερον (5), the utmost accomplishment of pleasure in life, but the κάλλιστον (10), the very best of human existence tout court.[57] Having stated a principle of general validity, he adds:

> *Od.* 9. 12–15
> σοὶ δ' ἐμὰ κήδεα θυμὸς ἐπετράπετο στονόεντα
> εἴρεσθ', ὄφρ' ἔτι μᾶλλον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω:
> τί πρῶτόν τοι ἔπειτα, τί δ' ὑστάτιον καταλέξω;
> 15κήδε' ἐπεί μοι πολλὰ δόσαν θεοὶ Οὐρανίωνες.
>
> But thy heart is turned to ask of my grievous woes,
> that I may weep and groan the more.
> What, then, shall I tell thee first, what last?
> for woes full many have the heavenly gods given me.

Odysseus explicitly contrasts his position as internal narrator with that of the rest of the audience and points out, as Heubeck notes, that singing of his own misfortune may bring joy to Alcinous and the rest of the audience, yet to him will "increase his sorrow still further".[58]

Nevertheless, following the poetic declaration, at line 16, Odysseus skilfully begins his own storytelling, what antiquity knew as "Ἀλκίνου ἀπόλογος" or "ἀπόλογοι" (cfr. Plat. *Resp.* 614b; Arist. *Poet* 16.5, *Rhet.* 3.16.7). Odysseus, the protagonist of his own story, will hence take turns with Demodocus singing the tales of his adventurous voyage from Troy to Scheria, which occupy books 9 to 12. From the narratological angle, the shift in narrator – from external to internal – shows a general rule of storytelling, namely that the protagonist of a story can bear to have it narrated only if she/he themselves are the storytellers, as Odysseus does before

57 Cf. *Od.* 9. 2–11.

58 Heubeck in Heubeck *et al. ad loc*, and Palmisciano in this volume.

multiple audiences and in different settings throughout the *Odyssey*.[59] At that point, switching his position from narratee to primary narrator, Odysseus becomes master of his story, distancing himself from his own emotions by narrating them.

8 Too Close to Home: ἀναμνήσαντα οἰκήια κακὰ

How far beyond the epic does the poetic principle of reception we have examined above extend? A case taken from the history of the tragic genre and an Aristotelian passage will show its extensive validity. In 476 BCE, the playwright Phrynicus performed the tragedy *The Capture of Miletus*, which staged a recent event, the sack and burning of the Ionian Miletus in 494 BCE, during the revolt against the Persians. The Athenian reaction to the performance is famously described in Hdt. 6.21.2:

> Ἀθηναῖοι μὲν γὰρ δῆλον ἐποίησαν ὑπεραχθεσθέντες τῇ Μιλήτου ἁλώσι τῇ τε ἄλλῃ πολλαχῇ, καὶ δὴ καὶποιήσαντι Φρυνίχῳ δρᾶμα Μιλήτου ἅλωσιν καὶ διδάξαντι ἐς δάκρυά τε ἔπεσε τὸ θέητρον, καὶ ἐζημίωσάν μιν ὡς ἀναμνήσαντα οἰκήια κακὰ χιλίῃσι δραχμῇσι, καὶ ἐπέταξαν μηδένα χρᾶσθαι τούτῳ τῷ δράματι.
>
> The Athenians made clear their deep grief for the taking of Miletus in many ways, but especially in this: when Phrynichus composed a play entitled "The Fall of Miletus" and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; they fined Phrynicus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally, and forbade the performance of that play forever.

Herodotus says that the tragedian was fined a thousand drachmas for having staged a disaster, the conquest and annihilation of the Ionian people of Miletus, recalling the tragic fate of people too close to the Athenians, who had taken part in the revolt, sending aid to the Ionians (Hdt. 6.21). As happened to Odysseus in hearing the stories he had experienced in the first person, so the Athenians in Phrynicus' audience were forced to retrieve a traumatic memory and were like the Homeric hero overwhelmed by grief and unbearable tears such that "the whole theatre fell to weeping". In analogy with the widow's simile, the Athenians did not simply grieve for the capture of Miletus, they did so exceedingly: ὑπεραχθεσθέντες. As Odysseus, the Athenians were unable to imagine the events of the play at the

59 Cf. *Od.* 15. 400–401, where Eumaeus states that one can enjoy the telling of trials and sorrowful experiences once they are over, in an earlier version of Vergil's *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*. On narrators, see de Jong 2004, 1–4. On the narratological perspective on emotions see Bakker / Berg / Klooster 2022a and 2022b.

right distance, which were "zoomed in" almost intrusively. In this case as well, identity replaced simulation, a cognitive process that, as we have seen, collapses the distance necessary for enjoying a story and a performance alike.[60]

Sourvinou-Inwood defines the choice of a contemporary tragic subject as "transgressive" and specifies that "the characteristics of the transgressive choice are that the world of the play is basically the same as the world of the audience."[61] The scholar adds that such an experiment with the subject matter was later abandoned: "the absence of distance, or at least of sufficient distance, between the world of the play and the world of the audience was considered inappropriate".[62] Sourvinou-Inwood makes the distance a basic dramatic principle that creates a double perspective within the tragedy: one projects the world of tragedy into the heroic past and the other brings that world closer to that of the public through a foundation or a cultic reality that has a direct referent in the present. For this purpose, Sourvinou-Inwood argues, tragedy deploys devices for zooming-in and distancing: the first allow the reality of the drama to be made significant for the present reality of the polis, while the second enable the exploration of emotionally difficult themes that would feel threatening if shown too closely. The distancing – temporal, cultural, or geographical – thus functions vis-à-vis the boldness and danger constituted by the exploration itself.[63]

Herodotus refers to the connection of kinship the Athenians felt to the Ionians, and their own involvement in the Ionian revolt and Persian affaires in general, by the term οἰκεῖος, "of the same household, family, or kin, related" (*LSJ*), i. e. somebody or something towards which one has a close, at-home feeling.

Indicatively, the same notion of '*oikos*-feelings', i. e. personal relatedness to a story told, comes to the fore in a passage of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* about the functioning of the emotion of *eleos*, the feeling of pity we experience for another (*Rhet.* 2. 8. 12):

> ἐλεοῦσι δὲ τούς τε γνωρίμους, ἂν μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγὺς ὦσιν οἰκειότητι. περὶ δὲ τούτους ὥσπερ περὶ αὐτοὺς μέλλοντας ἔχουσιν
>
> The persons people pity are those whom they know, provided they are not too closely connected with them, for if they are, they feel the same as if they themselves were likely to suffer (trans. J.H. Freese, modified).

60 Arnauld 1990, 196, 198 differentiates epic from theatre's audiences; the case of Phrynichus proves otherwise.

61 Sourvinou-Inwood 2007, 16.

62 Eadem, 19.

63 Eadem, 23–53 and passim.

Aristotle states that we feel *eleos* for people we know unless they are related to us in a relationship of οἰκειότης, that is of "intimacy", "closeness", "familiarity", that is the type of personal, familiar involvement that erases the minimum distance from the other person's fate. Aristotle brings to the fore the question of distance as crucial to the process of simulation and emotional resonance, asserting that the distance between identification and identity should not be bridged and a person's misfortunes should not get too close to those related or displayed.

As shown in the cases of Odysseus, Penelope, the hypothetical kinsman evoked in Alcinous' questioning, and of the Athenians with their *oikeia kakà* inappropriately evoked, when distance collapses, pity ceases and is replaced by suffering.[64]

9 Conclusions: Close, but not too Close

In conclusion, simulation is a key element for unifying different maps and theories, where the as-if mechanism and the distinction between identification and identity is not only a catholic aesthetic principle with a pivotal role in epic and Greek poetics in general but extends to our neurophysiology. Simulation underlies the functioning of neural systems involved both in the mentalizing system at the basis of Theory of Mind and in the mirror neuron system, as well as, more broadly speaking, in imagination, metaphor, and last but not least, artificial intelligence.

The stories, sung or told by epic singers, poets, or storytellers provide a privileged material for new simulations that trigger simulative mechanisms in the audience, which enjoys and experiences the stories of other humans, resulting in pleasurable absorption and identification. In this direction, simulation and emotional distance involve a complex relationship between narrator, character, poet-performer, especially in epic storytelling, where, as Bakker has argued "the relation between the narrator *of* the tale and characters *in* the tale in Homer is more complicated than would seem in ordinary narratological analysis".[65] In the embodied performance of these stories, an interdependent and interactive relationship is established between poet and audience, with varying degrees of identification and empathetic response, rendering the mirror game of distance complex

64 The question of distance comes also to the fore in Meineck's analysis of Greek drama and directly connected to dissociation: "Greek drama was just such a dissociative, dissonant experience that promoted cognitive absorption. Hence, in antiquity we find many references to 'soul-moving' or 'spellbinding' qualities of performance and its emotional effects", as in Meineck 2017, 206; see also the case of Gorgia's clever deception analysed by Nicolai in this volume.

65 Bakker 2009, 128.

and open-ended. Still, the overall principle governing these narrations obtains as 'neither too close nor too far', where a clear line is drawn between identification and identity, *as if* and *is.*

Simulation and as-if processes seem to work through different media and performances; 'getting it right' for a storyteller as well as for a director means moving in the space of possibility and simulation, where the audience may identify with characters and the story from a safe distance, resorting to the embedded and embodied capacities of the mirror neuron system and of the mentalizing system where simulative processes and mind-reading may have free rein in the space of imagination.[66]

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66 In a famous and much discussed passage of *Poetics* 1451a-8 Aristotle declares: Φανερὸν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. (..) ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα [5] λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν: ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει. "It is clear from what we said that the work of the poet is not telling what happened, but what might happen, and what is possible, according to principles of likeness and consistency (...) They differ in this: that history tells what happened, poetry tells what might happen". The difference between possibility and reality, imagination and memory may be looked at now under the lens of the cognitive processes of identification and simulation that we have illustrated in different fields and settings. In our interpretive framework, the Aristotelian expression οἷα ἂν γένοιτο may be understood as an 'as-if procedure', integral to the functioning of our mind, which has been shown to explain all ways of storytelling and hence literary fictional communication, both oral and written.

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