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BAKHTINIAN ALTERITY, HOMERIC RAPPORT

NANCY FELSON-RUBIN

Several concepts first set forth by Mikhail Bakhtin in two early essays from the 1920s—"Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" and "Toward a Philosophy of the Act"—offer new possibilities for examining and interpreting how characters relate to one another in the fictional world of Homer's *Odyssey*.¹ Using these concepts, especially live-entering, value center, and field of vision, I shall ask what new sense they allow me to make of the interactions between Penelope and Odysseus, specifically of their marital rapport, which Homer implies is based on like-mindedness (*homophrosunê*) and reciprocity. I shall demonstrate how Homer constructs a dialogic relation between them, especially as compared to other couples in the epic poem, and shall argue that their intrinsic versatility (or "polytropy") enhances their capacity to re-establish an enduring and thoroughly Bakhtinian rapport.

Bakhtin's view of "radical otherness" or "alterity" as the defining condition of all perception and therefore of all representation influences the epistemology of all his writings. For any individual, he argues, sight is always partial, never complete, and the particular place from which something is perceived determines its meaning. This "uniquely situated place in the overall structure of possible points of view"—an individual's "blind

¹ "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," first published in Russian in 1979, appears in Holquist and Liapunov (edd.) 1990.4–256. "Toward a Philosophy of the Act," first published in Russian in 1986, will appear in the same Texas Slavic Series. I have relied on Morson and Emerson 1989.5–29, who carefully summarize and quote from "Toward a Philosophy of the Act." Holquist 1990 uses a slightly different title: "Philosophy of the Deed." He locates these two essays among Bakhtin's philosophical works composed in his earliest period (1919–1924).

spot”—characterizes all human vision.² Moreover, while one never perceives oneself as finished or complete, one nevertheless sees others as already having become what they are.³ Bakhtin celebrated this alterity. His “dialogism” is “a gay science of the other, that other who is my friend because only from him can I get myself.”⁴

In “Toward a Philosophy of the Act,” in line with this epistemology, Bakhtin insists on the radical singularity of each person at every moment.⁵ This insistence leads him to affirm individual responsibility or answerability for action. “There are,” he asserts, “no alibis for being”; a person is obligated to acquire knowledge and, having acquired it, to impart a “tone” to it and “sign” or “acknowledge” it. The Russian word for acknowledgement, *priznanie*, means a bringing of knowledge toward one by attaching it to (*pri-*) one’s self. This attachment, or “signature,” produces responsible action.⁶

A vital concept in this early essay is *vzhivanie*, “live–entering.” In live–entering, humans neither completely lose themselves nor do they abandon their singular place outside the other. Rather, they enter another’s place while still maintaining their own place, their own “outsideness” with respect to that other. *Vzhivanie* respects both persons and does not, like empathy, try to erase the “first person,” the self, by dissolving it into the “second,” the other. From *vzhivanie* something new and helpful can emerge—something Bakhtin calls “creative understanding.” When this happens, neither the self nor the other dominates, nor is either one eclipsed.

In “Author and Hero” (26) Bakhtin states the proper way to empathize with another’s suffering:

The life situation of a suffering human being that is really experienced from within may prompt me to perform an

2 Holquist 1990.xxiv. See also “Author and Hero,” 22–27, where Bakhtin describes the impossibility of ever experiencing another whole human being who is situated outside and over against me as that human being experiences me. “As we gaze at each other,” he writes, “two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.”

3 In Bakhtin’s view, self and other (as the two poles of all perceptual possibilities) are characterized by a different space and a different time: the self’s time is open, unfinished; others we conceive as completed.

4 Holquist 1985.225.

5 My summary of the relevant ideas in this untranslated essay comes from Morson and Emerson 1989.5–30. I do not include page citations to the Russian text since I am myself relying on their summary and partial translations.

6 In Russian “responsibility” contains the root word for answer or respond and thus suggests dialogism by its etymology.

ethical action, such as providing assistance, consolation, or cognitive reflection. But in any event my projection of myself into him must be followed by a *return* into myself, a *return* to my own place outside the suffering person, for only from this place can the material derived from my projecting myself into the other be rendered meaningful ethically, cognitively, or aesthetically. If this return into myself did not actually take place, the pathological phenomenon of experiencing another's suffering as one's own would result—an infection with another's suffering, and nothing more.

Counterpoising *I* to *other*, Bakhtin sets forth the conditions for creative understanding (as opposed to empathy). He eschews the Romantic idea of co-experience, where an aesthetic value is immanent in a single consciousness and therefore not dialogic. Instead he argues for the interdependence of self and other, and for the reciprocity that results when a soul is shaped in me and given final form by another (“I-for-another”). This also occurs when a soul is shaped in another and given final form in me (“another-for-me”). To “I-for-another” and “another-for-me” contrast “I-for-myself”: “my self as I experience it, eternally unfinished and open to change.”

Bakhtin distinguishes the other's surroundings from his or her field of vision, or “circumvision.” For example, a neutral third person observer sees my surroundings but not my field of vision, which I see from my “blind spot,” from my own emotional-volitional field. Thus my field of vision is uniquely mine and by definition no one else can penetrate or share it. Bakhtin calls this field of vision a “value center” and asserts that “each of us organizes the world into a complex of values different from that of every other person, each of whom has a specific value center, too.”

For Bakhtin, a poem offers a complex of overlapping and interacting value centers. Its hero or heroine is the representation of a person with all of his or her emotional-volitional tones and values finalized (or put into completed form) by the poet. As author-creator, the poet gives shape to his hero or heroine through live-entering; his relation to this personage is unidirectional, however, unlike the relation *between* characters in art or, in life, between I and an other.⁷

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a character who (to a surprising de-

⁷ Holquist 1990.xxx. Cf. “Author and Hero,” especially 4–22.

gree) participates in dialogic interaction—primarily with female characters he encounters on his journey and with the potentially dangerous Penelope. In his speech to the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa in Book 6, Odysseus articulates the nature of a good marriage between a man and his wife, invoking a principle, *homophrosunê*, which suggests dialogicality. He tells Nausicaa at 6.180–85:⁸

May the gods give you everything that your heart longs
for;
may they grant you a husband and a house and like-
mindedness (*homophrosunê*)
in all things, for nothing is better than this, more
steadfast
than when two people, a man and his wife, are like-
minded in their thoughts (*homophroneonte*
noêmasin);
a thing that brings much joy to their well-wishers, and
distress to their enemies,
and for them the best reputation.

The *homophrosunê* (“like-mindedness”) that Odysseus wishes for Nausicaa aptly describes his own marriage to Penelope, as conceived by Homer and as enacted in their second courtship (conducted for the most part with Odysseus in disguise), after he returns to Ithaca. The term seems to denote a couple’s like way of perceiving the world based on each partner’s “field of vision.” Indeed, the dual form of the participle *homophroneonte* emphasizes the irreducible “twoness” of the partners: figures in a homophrosynic marriage remain radically discrete yet, miraculously, their desires coincide.

One could characterize Books 13–23 as an elaborate courtship dance between Odysseus and Penelope. In many scenes, “Homer” shows each character acting “I-for-myself” yet laying the groundwork for “I-for-another.” If Homer had only depicted Odysseus behaving “I-for-myself,” we would not infer a dialogic marital interaction; but alongside Odys-

⁸ I have used the translation of Lattimore. Occasionally, as for *homophrosunê* and *homophroneonte*, I substitute my own more literal translation.

seus' "I" and Penelope's "other" he counterpoises Penelope's "I" and Odysseus' "other."

Soon after Odysseus comes to the palace, he sends Eumaeus the swineherd to set up an interview with Penelope. Eumaeus acts as an intermediary between them, carrying messages back and forth like a matchmaker. After several exchanges, the beggar Odysseus persuades his hostess, Penelope, to meet him at the hearth in the evening.

In Book 19, at the interview itself, Odysseus tries to maintain his advantage over Penelope by lying about his identity and yet invoking her sentiments. His lie includes the claim that Odysseus visited him twenty years earlier in Crete, on his way to Troy. Penelope asks what he was wearing. Odysseus replies by carefully describing the clasp that secured his visitor's mantle. It had engraved upon it (the stranger recalls) a depiction of the moment of capture of a fawn by a hound who "preyed on the fawn and strangled it and the fawn struggled with its feet as it tried to escape." Can the clasp, with its design of hound and fawn, express their dialogic marriage, fraught with potential danger but with each self counterpoised, as an "I-for-myself," against the other?

The clasp is polysemous; it conveys meanings both as an object and through its decoration. As a gift from wife to husband, it binds Odysseus, reminding him of Penelope's claims, which, in describing the clasp, he implicitly acknowledges. Moreover, a homology exists in early Greek poetry between hunting and sexuality; the two semantic realms can serve as metaphors for one another.⁹ Thus the engraved decoration on the clasp celebrates not only Odysseus' well-known hunting prowess, but also his erotic conquest of Penelope, both initially, during their first courtship, and now, at their second. Odysseus is the predatory hound that has just captured the fawn Penelope, who tries to escape. The fawn's staunch resistance corresponds to Penelope's hesitation, her attraction to other men, her reluc-

⁹ Archaic Greek poetry frequently compares virgins to fawns. For example, at the end of Archilochus' erotic fragment (P. Colon. inv. 7511), the speaker describes the virgin in the garden as "trembling like a fawn." In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 174–78, the marriageable daughters of Celeus dart along the road "as deer or heifers in the season of spring, sated in their hearts with pasture frisk over a meadow." In his simile at *Odyssey* 4.335–40 (repeated by Telemachus to his mother at 17.126–31), Menelaus likens Penelope and her suitors to the doe and her fawns and Odysseus to the predatory lion whose lair they invade. Finally, in the simile at 6.127–38, lion-like Odysseus is about to mingle among the young maidens, who resemble cattle, sheep, or deer.

tance to accept Odysseus as her husband.¹⁰ (These responses arouse and challenge Odysseus, rather than incur his blame.)

The clasp design expresses aggression and a momentary asymmetry or imbalance. The two animals, the hound and the fawn, play the roles of predator and prey, pursuer and pursued, and the hound has the clear advantage. Surprisingly, Penelope and Odysseus can each occupy either role, alternately the dominator or the dominated. The hound is Odysseus, the fawn Penelope; but the hound is also Penelope and the fawn Odysseus. The scene on the clasp, a vignette of entrapment, iconically represents their interactions as they hoodwink one another with disguises, lies, and manipulations.

Odysseus describes the scene to Penelope at a moment when the outcome of their interaction is still uncertain. Indeed, their interchange about the clasp heightens the erotic tension of the interview, and the hunting scene on the clasp underscores the risk for both partners in their dynamic, not trouble-free union.

In the same interview, after Penelope weeps upon hearing the stranger describe the clasp and accepts him as her guest–friend, she divulges her dream of the geese and eagle. In the dream itself, she weeps three times about the death of her pet geese, slaughtered by the returning eagle; the eagle, in the dream, becomes Odysseus, and he interprets the geese as her suitors whom he, the eagle, has just slain. Odysseus the stranger, seated at the hearth, seconds eagle–Odysseus’ interpretation; yet Penelope remains skeptical and cautious. Right then, she announces her momentous decision to set up the bow contest for her hand in marriage. Beggar–Odysseus, guest–friend, endorses her proposal spontaneously and out of his own desire, saying to his wife (19.583–87):

O respected wife of Odysseus, son of Laertes,
do not put off this contest in your house any longer.

¹⁰ For Penelope’s attraction to others see the discussion of her dream below; cf. also the speech of Antinous at 2.91–92. Penelope’s reluctance to accept Odysseus is evident in Book 23, even when she knows it is he. Cf. her use of the second person pronoun at 23.175–76:

but I know very well what *you* looked like
when you went in the ship with the sweeping oars, from Ithaca.

Before these people can handle the well-wrought bow,
and manage
to hook the string and bend it, and send a shaft through
the iron,
Odysseus of the many designs will be back here with
you.

There is no collusion between them (although Homer does not preclude a tacit complicity). Penelope simply makes a move and Odysseus endorses it; autonomously and from their own fields of vision, each chooses to enact this single, critical event. Odysseus' words contain an interpretation of Penelope's motivation, to have Odysseus return in time to win the contest; but, at a higher level, Homer leaves Penelope's intentions quite ambiguous and perhaps even out of Odysseus' reach. The scene invites us to witness each character operating within a personal and unique field of vision, as an "I-for-myself"; yet each shows the concern of "I-for-another" and Homer represents Penelope's choice and Odysseus' endorsement of it as a coincidence of discrete desires.

A similar rapport without loss of identity is evident in their exchange of stories on the marriage-bed (23.300–09):

When Penelope and Odysseus had enjoyed their
lovemaking,
they took their pleasure in talking, each one telling his
story.
She, shining among women, told of all she had endured
in the palace, as she watched the suitors, a ravening
company,
who on her account were slaughtering many oxen
and fat sheep, and much wine was being drawn from
the wine jars.
But shining Odysseus told of all the cares he inflicted
on
other men, and told too of all that in his misery
he had toiled through. She listened to him with delight,
nor did any
sleep fall upon her eyes until he had told her
everything.

Homer pairs the two narrations, maintaining the distinctness and irreducible separateness of each tale. He represents each teller as a separate value center, neither of whom erases the alterity of the other. Consider, by contrast, how the ghost of Agamemnon interprets the resolution of Odysseus' and Penelope's story (24.192–202):

O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices,
 surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great
 virtue.
 How good was proved the heart that is in blameless
 Penelope,
 Ikarios' daughter, and how well she remembered
 Odysseus,
 her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue
 shall never
 die away, but the immortals will make for the people
 of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent
 Penelope.
 Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil
 deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and a song of
 loathing
 will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation
 of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous.

Agamemnon situates Penelope's great virtue (*megalê aretê*) within his account of Odysseus' success, which came because she remembered him, and because she was a good wife; he conceives of her *aretê* solely as the instrument of Odysseus' return.¹¹ Neither here nor in the First Nekyia does Agamemnon allot her a story of her own. In like manner, he incorporates Clytemnestra's treachery within his account of his own demise, for which he gives her eternal blame. She too has no other story in his telling. By contrast, Nestor at 3.265–66 presents the Argive story both from Clytemnestra's and Agamemnon's fields of vision and value centers. Agamemnon, then, characteristically (if understandably) erases the autonomy of the wife

¹¹ I take the prepositional phrase at 24.193, *sun megalê aretê*, "with great virtue," as Penelope's attribute; for another view see Nagy 1979.37–38, who translates: "It is truly with great merit [*aretê*] that you got a wife."

(his own and Odysseus'), denying her a story in her own right; in this he differs markedly from Odysseus.

The importance of *homo-phrosunê* can be seen in its relation to the noun *eu-phrosunê*, literally, "well-mindedness," sometimes translated "mirth" or "good cheer," and its cognate verb *euphrainesthai*, "to cause to rejoice," "to cheer." Five of the eight occurrences of the noun or verb in the *Odyssey* pertain to couples and their effects upon one another.¹² *Euphrosunê* is also a product of effective poetry, as seen in the passage that opens Book 9, where Odysseus calls listening to a god-like singer the supreme occasion (9.5–6):

for I think there is no accomplishment more gratifying
than when festivity (*euphrosunê*) holds sway among all
the populace.

This effect of *euphrosunê* is precluded by prolonged and unresolved disharmony, by unrelenting dissonance. In the case of poetry, such dissonance could be dissolved by *thelksis*, "enchantment," but this outcome is by no means guaranteed. In fact, between enemies there can be no progression toward *euphrosunê* because their *nous* and *phrenes* are too dissimilar to allow creative understanding to emerge.¹³ (Consider the absence of *homophrosunê* between Zeus and Hera in the *Iliad*: *dolophrosunê*, "deceit-mindedness," and its corresponding participle, *dolophroneonte*, characterize their interactions, and their dissension borders on enmity and warfare.¹⁴)

When he begins to mature, Telemachus can no longer dine with

¹² The housemaids "gladden" the suitors, with whom they sleep (20.7–8). Circe attempts to "gladden" Odysseus, who is downhearted (10.465). Odysseus tells the Phaeacian men to "gladden" their wives and children (13.44). Penelope prays for death so that she may not "gladden" a lesser man than Odysseus (20.82). Finally, Eurycleia tells Odysseus and Penelope to "gladden" one another (23.52). In all cases Homer uses *euphrainesthai* or one of its cognates, e.g., *euphrosunê* + verb.

¹³ Homer frequently uses *dusmenees* (16.121 and 234) or *dusmenees andres* (22.234), literally, "men ill-disposed toward one another," to describe the suitors in the *Odyssey* in their relation to Odysseus. It is the common Homeric term for enemies.

¹⁴ Cf. *Iliad* 14.197 and 300–29 and 19.97, 106 and 112. In the *Odyssey*, *dolophroneonte* occurs three times: once for Circe (10.339) and twice in a formula indicating Odysseus' attitudes toward the suitors (18.51 = 21.274). At *Iliad* 3.405 Helen uses the participle to characterize Aphrodite's hostility toward her. *Dolophrosunê* and *dolophroneonte* are the virtual opposites of *homophrosunê* and its corresponding participle, *homophroneonte*.

his mother's suitors nor rejoice (*euphrainesthai*) with them (2.311). In the same way, Penelope prays to die straightway so that she may not be forced to "gladden" (*euphrainoimi*) the mind of a suitor (20.82).

The rapport that Homer attributes to (and constructs for) the Ithacan pair is fundamentally dialogic. This rapport is not the romantic notion of the collapse of two selves into one but rather a remarkable coincidence of thought processes, *noêmata*. In the case of Odysseus and Penelope, however, where both have a *nous* focused on reunion, both share an interest in their common *oikos*, and both are well disposed toward the other (as an "I-for-another"), the tolerance for disparate desires and for difference is relatively high. The question is, can there be radical otherness between them, or has Homer constructed their *homophrosunê* in such a way as to eliminate any risk of rupture?

For both Penelope and Odysseus, risk alternates with pleasure. While Odysseus watches and tests Penelope in Books 13–19, he proceeds with extreme caution. By his disguise, he deliberately maintains an advantage over her. As he watches her manipulate the suitors and extract gifts, he feels more pleasure than danger; yet the risk that she will reject him remains. In the Underworld he asked his mother (11.176–79):

about the wife I married, what she wants, what she is
 thinking,
 and whether she stays fast by my son and guards
 everything,
 or if she has married the best man among the Achaians.

From Athena he learned that Penelope sends secret promises and messages to the suitors (13.380–81). This gives him more reason for concern about his own safety (cf. 13.383–85). Even once he has killed all the suitors and been proclaimed to Penelope as her husband, she still hesitates. Her reluctance to accept him in Book 23 (for whatever reasons) justifies his taking of precautions; only when Penelope finally embraces him (23.205) can Odysseus experience pleasure, relief, and joy.

Penelope, in her turn, moves cautiously toward Odysseus in Books 19–23. Only when Eurycleia tells her he has come home, slaughtered the suitors, and sent for her does she feel a lessening of danger and an awakening of the possibility of pleasure. Penelope's erotic pleasure is already evident in her narration of the dream of the eagle and the geese to her guest: "I take pleasure (*iainomai*)," she says, "in watching my geese"

(= suitors) (19.537). Penelope experiences her pleasure before Odysseus, but less openly, for she still risks being duped by a god or by a clever stranger or by her own hopes.

There is no safety, then, for either member of the couple in the other before their embrace, lovemaking, and exchange of *muthoi* (23.205, 300–01). Up until then, each tests the other relentlessly and aggressively. Characteristic of their interaction is the way each makes room for the value center and field of vision of the other (their respective timetables, agendas, and desires). Odysseus attempts to live–enter Penelope when he asks his mother’s shade of her plans and intentions (11.177); Penelope attempts to live–enter Odysseus when she inquires about the journey he must make to placate Poseidon and accepts its necessity. At news of their further trial, she exclaims (23.286–87):

If the gods are accomplishing a more prosperous old
age,
then there is hope that you shall have an escape from
your troubles.

Recognizing and accepting the trials ahead, Penelope expresses a qualified hope (*gêras ge*) for a future release from cares. Thus, both she and Odysseus bring out the *aretê* of the other by observing the principles: “I–for–myself, the–other–for–me, and I–for–another.”¹⁵

There is a risk in hearing otherness, a “risk of inquiry,” as Eric Fogel remarks in an essay called “Coerced Speech” in *Rethinking Bakhtin*. For Fogel, “communication itself is by nature more coercive and disproportionate than we think when we sentimentalize terms like dialogue and communication. . . . It is effected by aggression, or conquering force, and is as a result often sinister—as in international relations, for example, if communication is coercive and disproportionate in its installment, an increase in communication becomes an increase in domination and violence.”

¹⁵ The colorful verb *amphipoleuein*, “fuss over, tend,” which Penelope uses twice in a formulaic response to a compliment about her *aretê* (18.255 and 19.127), belongs to the semantic category of “other–for–me.” Another word, *kêdos*, and its cognate verb, *kêd-omai*, which Achilles in the *Iliad* uses of his feeling–tone for Briseis (*Il.* 9.340–43), would be “I–for–another.” All three of the principles are observed by Penelope and Odysseus.

“When we think of ‘dialogue’ in general terms,” Fogel concludes, “we must not sentimentally ignore force and danger.”¹⁶

In this spirit, I shall conclude by suggesting that the marital relation between Odysseus and Penelope, both “polytropic” figures or figures “of many turns,” lacks neither aggression nor risk. The acts they perpetrate upon one another, for the sake of self-preservation, take the form of play, ultimately, only because their like-mindedness assures a safe landing. This is true, however, only because of Homer’s intentions and omniscience, which assure their survival as a couple.¹⁷ Thus, through his contrivances, the result of their “conversation,” their dialogism, is *philia*, not a bad Homeric equivalent of Bakhtin’s “creative understanding.”

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¹⁶ Fogel 1989.194.

¹⁷ For a more in-depth treatment of how the external hand of Homer (as author-creator) makes this happen and how he includes risk and danger in their interactions, see Felson-Rubin forthcoming.

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