

Herodotus on Persian Deception and Greek Poetry

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As he begins his paper on Herodotus, Leo Paul de Alvarez notes that “Herodotus’s *Histories* is the first book to speak of the difference between the East and the West, between the barbarians and the Hellenes.”¹ An inquiry into the inquiries of Herodotus, then, may consider the differences between the “ordering principles which became known as Western civilization,” and the custom, character, and nature of Eastern Civilization.² Indeed, de Alvarez’s arguments regarding the nature of the Greeks—as well as those of Seth Benardete before him—are thrown into sharp relief by analysis of the Persians, Egyptians, and Scythians. Such a juxtaposition is undertaken by Herodotus himself, as he conducts a survey of these other peoples before turning to the Greeks in the course of his *Histories*. Ultimately de Alvarez posits that what sets the Greeks apart from the rest of the world, in the eyes of Herodotus, is that “the Greeks have poetry and the rest of mankind none.”³ Benardete, for his part, initially points to the Greeks’ customs, more broadly, as the key factor that

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¹ Leo Paul S. de Alvarez, “Herodotus and the Scythians: Images and the Inquiry into the Soul,” *Ramify* Vol. 5, no. 1, (2015): 120.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 121.

separates them from the rest of the world, and both authors later point to the Greek gods, with de Alvarez stating that, “the salvation of the Greeks is in their gods. The gods are what free them from the forces of necessity.”⁴ Now, all three concepts—poetry, customs, and the gods—are deeply related, and de Alvarez seems to be right to point to poetry in particular as that which enfolds the latter two concepts and stands at the very foundation of Western Civilization. For poetry not only separates the Greeks from the rest of the world, but also allows them to develop a civil society that would germinate into all future Western culture. The freedom from necessity, and the ability to create through deception, gives the Greeks a new power—they understand the relationship of the divine, the political, and the non-political, and can establish control over their customs and laws.⁵

In the following pages, this paper will examine the civilization of the Persians, as described by Herodotus and analyzed by de Alvarez. In order to unravel de Alvarez’s argument more fully, one must turn to the Persians, antipode of the Greeks, who have a very particular relationship with poetry and with falsehood. This will add depth to de Alvarez’s understanding of poetry and help to make explicit the implication that poetry serves as the foundation of Western Civilization and the watchword of Greek innovation.

De Alvarez notes that the Persian invasion of Greece was “the coming of the rest of mankind against the Greeks.”⁶ Certainly, the Persians had conquered, controlled, or enlisted the aid of the majority of the other peoples discussed by Herodotus up to this point in the *Histories*, and stood as the only world power. His statement underscores the fact that the Greeks and the Persians embody two different understandings of how to interact with the larger world. As Benardete notes, Herodotus must “convert the Greek reader to the seeing of things not his own,” since the Greeks, like most people, are fondest of their own customs and believe them to be the best (III.38).⁷ But the Greeks *are* able to see things that are not their own, as Herodotus points to the fact that, “The names of nearly

⁴ Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 9; de Alvarez, 136.

⁵ Benardete, 10, 206–209.

⁶ de Alvarez, 121.

⁷ Benardete, 11.

all the gods came from Egypt to Greece" (II.49). For Herodotus the Greek religion has its origins in Egypt, serving as evidence of the Greeks' willingness to adopt aspects of what is outside of their own culture and bring it, albeit transformed, into their own culture. So, too, do the Persians accept things that are not their own. Their empire was not established independently, but taken from the Medes during a revolt led by Cyrus, who was himself born of a Persian father but a Median mother (I.107–108, 130). Herodotus claims "The Persians welcome foreign customs more than any other people," noting that they adopt Median dress, Egyptian armor, Greek pederasty, for "wherever they learn of enjoyments of all sorts, they adopt them for their own practice" (I.135). When Xerxes invades Greece his fleet consists of Phoenicians, Syrians, Egyptians, and ten other ethnic groups, while the army was composed of Persians, Medes, Cissians, Hyrcanians, and forty-five other ethnic groups, not including the Greeks and other Balkan peoples who fought with the Persians (VII.61–95). Although in a different manner than the Greeks, the Persian civilization is able to grow and change, to expand, and to adopt aspects of other cultures.

The Egyptians and the Scythians, on the other hand, do not allow for any growth or change in their own cultures. As Herodotus notes, the "Egyptians avoid following Greek customs and, to speak in general, the customs of any people other than their own" (II.91). The Egyptians believe themselves to be the second oldest of all peoples and are concerned more fundamentally with preservation than any of the other peoples discussed by Herodotus. De Alvarez notes that the Egyptians are a *bodily* people, and so even their gods "have tangible, earthly bodies, for the natural bodies of the animals are the vessels of the divine," and they attempt to preserve their bodies both while living—the men do not leave the house, follow a strict diet, purge themselves, etc.—and to preserve their bodies after death, via mummification (II.35, 77, 85–89).⁸ As Benardete notes, this *bodily* focus leads to a substitution of "the clean for the beautiful," a "denial of the living body," and a "ceremonial purification."⁹ The Egyptians are fundamentally concerned with rest, with the preservation of what came before them, so that they do not only reject the laws and customs of outsiders, but also "they follow their fathers' customs and take no others to themselves at all" (II.79). Even their great wonders are not

⁸ de Alvarez, 126.

⁹ Benardete, 43.

attempts to create something new, but a monument used to preserve the past, as in the case of the pyramids, or an attempt to preserve and order what is natural, as in the case of the canals. It is the mummy that best encapsulates this attitude of attempting to give fixity to what is in motion, as de Alvarez points out. He notes that “Since the natural body decays . . . something must be done to make it into an idol. What is done is to make the body into a mummy . . .” In doing so the Egyptians “attempt to turn the natural body itself, human and animal alike, into an image of immortality.”¹⁰ The Egyptians, then, cannot stand for either the East or the West, for both endeavor to *create* a civilization. The Egyptians can only be drawn from as a kind of source material by the East and the West.

For just the opposite reason, the Scythians can stand for neither East or West. If the Egyptians wish to be the oldest of peoples, and wish only to preserve the past, wish only for rest, then the Scythians are a people of constant motion, of newness. They are a nomadic people, they have no “cities or settled forts; they carry their houses with them and shoot with bows from horseback . . . how then can they fail to be invincible and inaccessible for others?” (IV.46). Just as the move towards rest means that the Egyptians cannot serve as the standard bearers of either the East or West, so too the Scythians’ constant motion means that they are “inaccessible to others.” Like Egypt, Scythia is a land of water, but whereas the Egyptians have tried to order and purify their water through the construction of an extensive network of canals, the Scythian rivers all run free. The Egyptians have one river, one source, whereas the Scythians have many (IV.47–58). The Nile and the canals cause the Egyptians to be settled, agricultural, but the Scythian rivers give the Scythians the freedom of motion, the dozens of flowing tributaries corresponding to the dozens of nomadic Scythian tribes. The Scythians consider themselves the “youngest of all nations,” but like the Egyptians they are hostile to the customs of outsiders (IV.5). Benardete notes that this entails the placement of “primacy in novelty, not in antiquity,” the rejection of what is foreign is because it is old, not new.¹¹ Like the Egyptians, the Scythians “dreadfully avoid the use of foreign customs, and especially those of the Greeks,” and kill both Anacharsis and Scyles for adopting Greek customs (IV.76–80). The Egyptians and the Scythians are alike in their difference,

¹⁰ de Alvarez, 126.

¹¹ Benardete, 102.

alike in their movement towards extremes, alike in their inability to create an all-encompassing civilization. Only the Greeks and the Persians, the West and the East, remain for Herodotus as fertile fields in which a civilization can be established that moves people towards happiness.

If the great difference between these two civilizations is poetry, then it must be shown that the Persians have no poetry, for it is certain already that the Greeks have poetry—as early as I.23 Herodotus introduces the reader to a Greek poet, Arion. It is here, in the discussion of the Persians, that de Alvarez's paper is in need of supplementation. Now, everything that he asserts regarding the account of the Persians in the *Histories* is accurate. He notes that "The Persians are first presented to us as truth-tellers; it is subsequently said that they do not even magnify the exploits of their great founder, Cyrus."¹² He summarizes by stating that "They see truly, speak truly, and act truly . . . they hate deception because it prevents one from acting in accordance with the natures of things."¹³ If the Persians are so decidedly set against deception, then surely poetry, which is deception after a fashion, cannot exist amongst them. De Alvarez goes on to assert that for the Persians, "word and deed, theory and practice, correspond perfectly one with another," that what is lawful is the same as what is natural.¹⁴ Now, all of this serves to position the Persians as the antithesis of the Greeks, who not only permit deception but celebrate Odysseus for his ability to deceive others. But in setting his argument about the Persians on only these grounds de Alvarez exposes himself to a counter-argument: for all that the Persians may *claim* to be unwilling to lie, and for all that they may desire the lawful to be the same as the natural, there are a host of examples held up to the reader by Herodotus in which the Persians *do* practice deception.¹⁵ Thus, Herodotus tells us that "No man has ever surpassed Zopyrus in the ranks of the Doers of Good Deeds for Persia," with the sole exception of Cyrus, and Zopyrus's great deed was the deception of the Babylonians (III.160).

¹² de Alvarez, 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁵ Only several examples of Persian deception will be discussed here. Others include Cyrus's attempt to woo Tomyris (I.205), Cambyses's attempt to deceive the Ethiopians (III.19–21), Atossa's concealment of the growth on her breast and subsequent enticement of Darius to attack the Greeks (III.133–134), Amasis's deception of the Barcaeans (IV.201), and Xerxes's attempted ruse after Thermopylae (VII.24–25).

The career of Darius, the most powerful ruler of the Persian Empire and the man who initiated the Persian invasion of Greece, is marked by deception. According to Herodotus, he rose to power following the usurpation of the throne by the Magian Smerdis, who used deception to fool the Persians into thinking he was Smerdis the son of Cambyses. The Persian Otanes grew suspicious, however, when Smerdis “never came out of the citadel and never summoned to his presence any of the Persian notables,” echoing the ruse used by the first ruler of the Median kingdom, Deioces, to make himself seem superior in nature to those he ruled (III.67–68; I.99).¹⁶ The false Smerdis is uncovered by Phaedyne, daughter of Otanes, who with her touch discovers that he has no ears—marking him out as the Smerdis punished by Cymbeses and not Smerdis the son of Cyrus. This is then revealed to the people by Prexaspes, who lies to the Magians and promises to give a speech supporting their rule, but then reveals the truth to the assembled Persians before leaping to his death. Darius and his compatriots seize this opportunity to overthrow the Magians, and Darius then ensures that he will become king by cheating his fellows in a contest with the assistance of his groom. After deciding that the new king will be he whose horse first neighed, Oebares, Darius’s groom, uses the scent of a mare to excite Darius’s stallion into neighing. Finally, after the Babylonians revolt against him and Babylon is under siege, Darius’s commander Zopyrus disfigures himself to feign punishment by Darius and defects to the Babylonians, convincing them that he is their ally, but at the vital moment he opens the gates of the city to Darius and allows the city to be sacked (III.74–75, 84–86, 153–160). Amidst all these deceptions Herodotus attributes the following assessment of lying to Darius:

Where a lie must be told, let it be told. Those of us who lie and those of us who tell the truth are bent upon the same object. The liars lie when they would win profit by convincing others of their lies; the truth-tellers tell

¹⁶Although the Persians are the representatives of the East, the Medians stand as their most closely-related nation. As has been noted above, the Persian Empire was established upon the Median by a man who was himself half Median and with the assistance of Median troops. The Persians hold the people closest to them in highest respect, and this would be the Medians. If, then, one also considers cases of Median deception one realizes that Cyrus’s survival and rise to power was facilitated by a series of lies told by Harpagus and Mitridates.

truth so that by their truth they may draw gain to themselves and be the more trusted. Our practices are different, but our aim is the same. (III.72)

For the Persians, deception is simply another means of achieving a goal. It is *like* the truth, but not because it points towards some higher truth or deeper understanding, but because the truth too is only a means to an end. Deception for the Persians is merely the obscuring of the truth, and not, like poetry is for the Greeks, capable of the creation of something new.

Indeed it is striking how *physical* and *negative* the lies of the Persians are. The key to Zopyrus's lie is the removal of his nose and ears and the killing of Persian soldiers, it is this that allows the Babylonians to believe his words and place him as commander in chief of their forces. His lie is a simple negative, that he is *not* loyal to Darius, unlike the lies, for example, of Odysseus, who creates a new story and identity for himself. So too is the deception of Prexaspes a simple act of concealment, for he agrees to follow the commands of the Magians before revealing the truth to the Persians. The lie itself reveals no truth, rather, the truth itself once spoken reveals the lie. Deception is used to seize or to maintain power, as a means of establishing control over the physical elements of *this* world. But it does *not* create a new power—Darius uses a ruse to become king over a kingdom that already exists, not to establish a new kingdom. The decision to continue the Persian Empire as a monarchy, and not to establish a democracy or oligarchy, is made during a series of speeches that appear free of deception, speeches that Herodotus indicates the Greeks are unwilling to accept as true (III.80–83). Perhaps because the Greeks view this idea of the creation of something new through speech as particularly Greek-like, and not something the Persians are capable of—but for all that, when the Persians *have* the opportunity to create something new, they instead choose to continue with the form of rule they already possess.

Persian deception, then, is not so different from Persian truth. The Persians are fundamentally concerned with power, with dominion over the body—whether this comes out from the bringing to bear of bodily force, as represented by the fact that they equate multitude with strength, or the manipulation of the mind and body with speech. So the larger point of de Alvarez regarding the Persians remains—the significance of their denial of the image. In the penultimate paragraph of his analysis of the Persians he posits that “the Persian turns to the effective word and not to

the image. It is power which is the final principle," and words that "make clear" the world allow one to dominate it, so "the mastery of things is the assurance that one knows."¹⁷ One could add, then, that this applies not only to words that *make clear* the world, but words that allow the Persian to *obscure* the world from others, so that he has some advantage over the other. The Persians, the East, cannot *create*, they cannot engage in dialectic—they absorb conquered peoples wholesale, taking from their customs but not truly merging them to create some new culture.

It is only the Greeks, the Greeks who have poetry, who can move towards something new. The Greek poet can survive death, as we see in the escape of Ariston but even more clearly in the story of Aristetas. The Greek poet can give men a higher standard, "Because the gods looked like human beings, men could look up to the gods and judge themselves in the light of the excellences which the gods displayed."¹⁸ As Benardete notes, it was Homer, "the poet," who "determined what the Greeks thought about war and peace, gods and men, the unjust and the just."¹⁹ Homer took the Egyptian gods, was aware of the Egyptian stories, but he did not take them wholesale as the Persians would—rather he adapted them, changed them, improved them, turned them into the basis of a civilization (II.50–53, 116). As de Alvarez argues, poetry can free us from necessity, "and through the poem, we experience the possibility of completeness; which is to say, we experience the possibility of the beautiful."²⁰ This freedom from necessity, this ability to move towards completeness, shows how the Greek's "deception" actually contains a higher truth, and guides the individual, and the civilization, towards a higher end. It allows man to consider the good, the soul; allows the civilization to understand it is concerned with more than the domination of the physical world. It allows the Greeks to balance the rest of the Egyptians with the motion of the Scythians, and to grow upwards and outwards whereas the Persians can only grow outwards. Poetry, the ability to create something new, to bring about truth through deception, to move towards what is good and immortal, rescued the Greeks from the Persians, and can still serve those who turn to it today.

¹⁷ de Alvarez, 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁹ Benardete, 127.

²⁰ de Alvarez, 138.