

Deliberation in the *Odyssey*, or Penelope's pressing crowd of thoughts

αὐτὰρ ἐπὴν νύξ ἔλθη, ἔλησί τε κοῖτος ἅπαντας,
κεῖμαι ἐνὶ λέκτρῳ, πυκινὰ δέ μοι ἄμφ' ἀδινὸν κῆρ
ὄξεϊαι μελεδῶναι ὄδυρομένην ἐρέθουσιν. (Odyssey 19.515-518)

But when night comes, and sleep has taken everyone,
I lie in bed, and pressing, sharp thoughts crowding
around my heart provoke me in my pain.

“[the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies crest] in a liminal realm of emergence, where half-actualized actions and expressions arise like waves on a sea to which most no sooner return” (Brian Massumi 1995: 91-92).

This paper considers the experience of choices in the *Odyssey*, particularly in the body and mind of Penelope. The formulaic structure in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* around decisions suggests a clear binary of choice with a rational decider. In the typical pattern, characters ponder (μερμηρίζειν) two alternative pathways of action (/ἦ.../ἦ...). The standard Odyssean resolution is [ὥδε δέ οἱ/ὥς ἄρα οἱ/ ὥδε δέ μοι] φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι. This (self)conscious deliberation typifies the heroic mode of the *Iliad* and Odysseus's self-reported narrative (cf. Scully 1984, Pelliccia 1995, Russo 2012).

Penelope's decisions in particular diverge from that model. Despite being built on the same formulaic system, her thoughts around decisions do not resolve. Instead, they swerve into a realm where potential courses of action shimmer and waver, where action emerges from a source that is difficult to pin down. This paper considers these decisions in light of intensity theory.

Brian Massumi defines intensity as “the incipience of mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression that are then reduced, inhibited, prevented from actualizing themselves completely—all but one” (1995: 91). The *Odyssey* represents Penelope buffeted by such a “pressing crowd” of impulses, some articulated and conscious, others hinted at and submerged.

Finally, this paper locates Penelope’s and Odysseus’s experience of choices in their bodies. Snell famously described Homeric man as a disjointed collection of organs and parts: “not as a unit, but as an aggregate” (1953: 6). This paper considers whether an “aggregate” vision of humans might shed light on the embodied process of deliberation.

Bibliography

Massumi, Brian. 1995. “The Autonomy of Affect.” *Cultural Critique* 31.II: 83-109.

Pelliccia, Hayden. 1995. *Mind, Body and Speech in Homer and Pindar*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Russo, Joseph. 2012. “Re-thinking Homeric Psychology: Snell, Dodds, and their Critics.”

Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica, New Series 101.2: 11-28.

Scully, Stephen. 1984. “The Language of Achilles: the OXΘΗΣΑΣ Formulas.” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 114: 11-27.

Snell, Bruno. 1953. *The Discovery of the mind: the Greek origins of European Thought*. T. G. Rosenmeyer, trans. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.