

INTRODUCTION: "I AM ODYSSEUS"

As we see it, Ulysses represents the first example of the infinite facility of the word. There is nothing one cannot say, invent, or make believable.¹

The first “selfie” in European culture seems to occur on an Athenian red-figure wine-mixing bowl (a stamnos) in Brussels, painted around 510 BC. The vase depicts a lavish party. On one side, three young men relax on fine couches. They are accompanied by young women (plate I). On the back of the vase (figure 1), two men add more wine to the party’s mixing bowl. The names of all the figures are written on the vase. On the left of the obverse, the girl Chorō sits at the foot end of a couch and enticingly unties the fillet in her hair. The young man on the couch, Pheidiadēs, reflexively responds and reaches out to her with one hand, while he balances his drink in his other. On the far right, a man named Automenēs has thrown his arm around a girl (her name is Rhodē) and draws her head toward his, all the while skillfully keeping his flat cup of wine from spilling. In the center of the composition, a girl named Helikē stands in front of the couch and plays the aulos for a young man named Smikros. He holds the back of his head with one hand, looks up, listens to the melody, and perhaps prepares to put words to it. The two men on the reverse are also named (Euarchos, Euelthōn). But the most interesting piece of writing is directly above the figures named Smikros and Helikē. It is the signature of the artist: *Smikros egraphsen*, “Smikros painted [it].”²



FIGURE 1: Brussels, Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, A717, red-figure stamnos, *ARV*² 20,1, signed by Smikros as painter, BAPD 200102. Photo courtesy and ©RMAH, Brussels. Reverse.

The inscribed names transform the conventional, generic figures into specific individuals. One effect is to suggest that we are looking at a unique occurrence, a real party, taking place at one particular time and place. The effect is unsettled, however, by the double occurrence of Smikros’ name. Because the name of a participant at the party is also the name of the artist who claims to have painted the vase, the inscriptions drag into the picture’s representational content a figure who is typically not present. The artist of this particular image, the texts claim, is someone we see participating in the fun represented within the image.

The boldness of the pictorial conception can be glimpsed by comparison to a picture admittedly more ambitious in almost every other way, the famous painting of 1656 entitled *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (Madrid, Prado, plate II). In *Las Meninas*, we see not only the *infanta* Margaret Theresa and her retinue but also the painter of the picture, Velázquez himself, holding his palette, standing back from a canvas. The philosopher John Searle famously argued that the painting is a paradox: the point of view from which an image is constructed by a painter must always lie outside the painting; yet here the painter has depicted himself within the image. Of course, it is possible for a painter to construct a painting with him- or herself as part of the pictorial content (*Las Meninas* is proof). Searle's strong claim that the image is a paradox was in part a response to the fact that *Las Meninas* is composed according to a rigorous perspectival geometry and a high standard of realism. The painted image really does pose serious questions about how it was constructed.³ The vase-painting in Brussels presents no comparable perspectival problems. The conventional features of the figures and furniture suggest that the picture was not created from direct observation. But Searle's anxiety—if that is a fair diagnosis—is a call to notice the oddity of a vase-painting like the one in Brussels. The artist is both outside the party, as he paints its picture on the vase, and inside of it, as a participant in the festivities. It does not matter that Smikros is not seen, at the moment depicted on the vase, painting a pot, as Velázquez is seen painting a canvas roughly the size of *Las Meninas*: anyone able to read the inscriptions on the vase in Brussels is able to grasp that Smikros is in two places at once.

Within early Greek culture, there is a rough analog for the point of view taken by Smikros on the vase in Brussels. Εἶμι' Ὀδυσσεύς, “I am Odysseus,” are the first words of the unforgettable story of adventure and adversity related by the hero to a spellbound party of Phaiakians in the *Odyssey* (9.19). This is a pivotal moment, not only within the epic but also in literary history. Though a character within the poem, Odysseus takes over the telling of the story from the narrator (i.e., “Homer”), who had invoked a supernatural power, the Muse, the daughter of Zeus, at the beginning of the epic, to sing the story of Odysseus, and then stepped back, so to speak, into the background. The importance of the shift in point of view is underscored by an important speech in the preceding Book Eight. The professional singer Demodokos has just performed a song about a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles. In a small hall-of-mirrors moment, the protagonist of both the *Odyssey* and Demodokos' story-within-the-*Odyssey* offers the singer a compliment on the quality of his poetry: “I respect you, Demodocus, more than any man alive—surely the Muse has taught you . . . or god Apollo himself. How true to life, all too true [*kata kosmon*] . . . you sing the Achaeans' fate [*my fate*] . . . as if you were there yourself or heard from someone who was” (8.487–491).⁴ Implicit

in Odysseus' compliment is the idea that he, having participated in the Trojan War, is an ideal arbiter of quality in poetry about the event, even as he is a character within it. In Book Nine, the hero takes a big step forward, from critic to performer. In so doing, Odysseus came to exemplify a different kind of relationship between story and storyteller from the one familiar from the opening lines of the *Odyssey* (or the *Iliad*). The point of view is personal, the narrator is embroiled in the action, and the claim to truth is implicit in the fact of his having experienced firsthand the events he relates. Like the literary character Odysseus, the pictorial figure Smikros has taken up the task of relating his own story. The obvious differences between the two works of art in medium, scale, ambition, and tradition should not be allowed to obscure this one basic similarity, that both Odysseus and Smikros narrate stories about themselves, based, seemingly, on their own extraordinary life experiences.

In the history of European art, self-portraiture is exceedingly rare before the Renaissance. It also tends to be quite different in format from the self-representation of Smikros. Renaissance and later self-portraiture tends to incorporate into the image some part of the process or experience of making the self-portrait (the hand of the artist sketching him- or herself, traces of the use of reflection, the artist shown working as an artist).⁵ The self-representation of Smikros is different. As J. D. Beazley put it, "the only certain self-portrait of a vase-painter shows him not at work but off duty."⁶ Smikros incorporates himself into the representation of activities that would seem to have nothing directly to do with the making and decorating of vases. In this respect, the image is not only at odds with the later history of self-portraiture, but also in relationship to ancient stereotypes about the way of life of ceramic artisans. It was a truism that the labor involved in the making of vases precluded participation in leisure activities like sympotic drinking. Here is what Xenophon and Plato had to say:

the illiberal arts (*banausikai*), as they are called, are spoken against, and are, naturally enough, held in utter disdain in our states. For they spoil the bodies of the workmen and the foremen, forcing them to sit still and live indoors, and in some cases spend the day at the fire. The softening of the body involves serious weakening of the mind. Moreover, these so-called illiberal arts leave no spare time for attention to one's friends and city (Xenophon, *Oikonomikos* 4.2–3, text/trans. Marchant and Todd 1923).⁷

"We could make the potters recline on couches from left to right before the fire drinking toasts and feasting with wheel alongside to potter with when they are so disposed . . . But urge us not to this, since, if we yield [the potter] will not be . . . a potter" (Plato, *Republic* 420e–421a, text/trans. Shorey 1930–1935).⁸ If the views expressed by Plato or Xenophon represent a widely held and long-standing social convention, it would seem unlikely that Smikros

the vase-painter could participate in a lavish symposium as a guest or insider. Yet the manipulation of inscriptions on the vase appears to create just such a counter-stereotypical scenario.

In teetering on the edge of the impossible, in seemingly ostentatiously portraying its own maker as denizen of high society, the vase-painting in Brussels (plate I, figure 1) works very differently from *Las Meninas* (plate II). One problem addressed by Velázquez was, what could possibly motivate or legitimize the presence of a (mere) painter within a group portrait of no less exalted company than the Spanish royal family? The solution employed by Velázquez was to paint the occasion on which the group portrait of the royal family was made. That occasion not only authorized the painter's presence. More importantly, it is the one occasion that grants to the painter an authority or power that raises him instrumentally above the level of the other courtiers and support staff of the royal family. Indeed, one of the ideas thematized in the picture, as Michel Foucault argued, is the intimate relationship between manipulating point of view and social or political power.⁹ The strategy employed by the Spanish painter was not really available to an Athenian vase-painter. Vase-painting appears not to have been made from life, in the sense that the represented figures “sat” for the duration of the making of the images of themselves, providing tangible models for the vase-painter to copy. A vase-painting depicting a painter painting a party would not have corresponded to any real practice, any actual experience, in Archaic Greece. That may explain why Smikros has not represented himself as a painter, but it does not offer any insight into the deeper meaning of the picture.

The only other well-known self-portrait from Classical antiquity no longer exists, but it offers nevertheless some clue into the problem and perhaps the strategy or pictorial conception at work on the Brussels vase. Several ancient writers report that the preeminent Classical sculptor Pheidias was accused of offenses connected with the creation of the gold and ivory statue of Athena Parthenos. One is embezzlement of the valuable materials used in the colossal project. The other is that Pheidias represented himself within the representation of the battle of Athenians and Amazons on the statue's famous shield. Here is Plutarch's account: “when he wrought the battle of the Amazons on the shield of the goddess, he carved out a figure that suggested himself as a bald old man lifting on high a stone with both hands, and also inserted a very fine likeness of Pericles fighting with an Amazon” (*Perikles* 31, trans. Perrin 1914–1926).¹⁰ For this, Plutarch says, Pheidias was imprisoned for the rest of his life. Part of the story has been shown by archaeological discoveries to be inaccurate. It is now virtually certain that Pheidias went on to create the even more famous gold and ivory statue of Zeus at Olympia after finishing his work on the Acropolis, so he could not have wasted away in prison in Athens.¹¹ But the story of the self-portraiture is instructive even if it is a fictional one. The

trouble arose because Pheidias, unlike Velázquez, did not represent himself in a way that justified or motivated his presence within the image. Since the subject matter was sacrosanct Athenian prehistory, the artist had no business being among the represented figures.

The earliest explicit reference to the self-representation of Pheidias within the shield is either in the (late Hellenistic?) Aristotelian text *Peri kosmou* (399 b 33–400 a 3) or Cicero (*Tusculian Disputations* 1.15, 34).¹² Is it possible that the self-portrait of Pheidias was familiar prior to the Hellenistic period? One tantalizing affirmative hint (though hardly proof) occurs in Aristophanes’ *Peace*. This text includes the earliest extant attestation of the accusation of embellishment. Immediately following the charge of financial irregularity is a reference to the representation of the face in the art of Pheidias. Hermes explains to Trygaios and the chorus why the goddess Peace disappeared: “First of all Phidias had at her, when he’d gotten into trouble. Then Pericles got frightened that he’d share Phidias’ bad luck” (604–606, text/trans. after Henderson 1998).¹³ So Perikles created a diversion via the Megarian decree. Trygaios and the chorus leader are amazed to learn that Pheidias had anything to do with Peace: “so that’s why her face is so lovely, being related to him!” (617–618, ταῦτ’ ἄρ’ εὐπρόσωπος ἦν, οὔσα συγγενῆς ἐκείνου). In this text, the only gloss or comment on Hermes’ narrative mentions nothing about money but explicitly emphasizes the representation of the face. It even employs language that is ambiguous enough to allow for the idea that the face of the goddess is so beautiful because it is related to a man who is also *euprosōpos*, that is, beautifully represented in some (self-)portrait. Evelyn Harrison concluded her study of the composition of the shield of Athena Parthenos in this way: “We begin to recognize [the report of portraits of Pheidias and Perikles on the shield] it for what it must be, an invention of comedy. Plutarch’s story, if it has a fifth-century origin, belongs not to the history of portraiture but to the history of political satire.”¹⁴

There is a valuable point to be drawn even if the allegation of outrageous self-portraiture does not underlie that passage of Aristophanes. We tend to express low opinions, and have low assessments, of the creativity of celebrity gossip, as we browse the tabloids at the supermarket. The presence of an accusation against an artist of the stature of Pheidias within the sophisticated comic poetry of an ancient literary icon suggests that fictions about artists may have been assessed differently in antiquity, as something more interesting than just gossip. As soon as he is finished reporting the accusations against Pheidias of embezzlement and self-portrayal, Plutarch mentions that another associate of Perikles, a woman, Aspasia, was put on trial (*Perikles* 32). With a straight face, Plutarch reports that the prosecutor was the comic poet Hermippos, and an acquittal of the charges was secured by Perikles because he shed so many tears in court. Sure, the story is not impossible—Hermippos was an Athenian,

and Perikles would not be the last man in history to be seen weeping in a courtroom. But Perikles was a popular figure within late fifth-century comedy, including the comedy of Hermippos himself, who once called Perikles “king of the satyrs.”¹⁵ One of the points that I hope to demonstrate in this book is that the conventions and expectations surrounding comedy—or, more precisely, the direct and indirect antecedents of those expectations within iambic poetry—are relevant to the understanding the newfangled genre of self-portraiture.

The story about Pheidias is relevant to the understanding of the self-portrait of Smikros (plate I) even if the comparison is not exactly apples to apples. It not only underscores the rarity and dubiousness of self-portraiture in the fifth century BC, but also highlights the potential popularity of deliberate fictions about artists. If it is true story, then the sculptural self-portrait is an original if troublesome creation of Pheidias. But if it is fiction, it is equally brilliant as a literary invention (and less litigious). How exactly is the fictional status of the Pheidias story relevant to the self-portrait of Smikros? The manner or style in which the vase in Brussels is painted has long been recognized as extremely close to the style of the painting signed by the innovative late sixth- and early fifth-century Athenian vase-painter and potter Euphronios. Thanks in part to a series of relatively recent discoveries and observations, there are now very good reasons to believe that the “self-portrait” of Smikros, and the other vases signed *Smikros egraphsen*, were painted by Euphronios. Euphronios is like Aristophanes (or some other comic poet) in inventing a story about an artist who depicts himself in such a way as potentially to raise eyebrows or ire. In the case of the story about Pheidias, the inappropriate aspect of the self-portrait is the context in which it occurs, both the type of object (quasi sacred) on which it appears and the type of event (patriotic mythology) in which he allegedly participated. The potentially implausible aspects of the pictorial fiction about Smikros are, first, that he attended a lavish party and, second, that the picture occurs on a fine stamnos. One likes to think of vases of that sort as circulating not among other members of the artisan class but among members of the social or political or economic elite, who expect to see someone like themselves in a picture of a lavish symposium. But the pictorial claim is much more, to sustain the analogy, than a piece of negative gossip (“At my last symposium,” some ancient socialite might say, “I was embarrassed by the picture on my new stamnos, because it depicted an *artisan* drinking with *our* kind of people!”). The claim is, much more importantly, an extraordinary positive invention. Euphronios has transformed the relationship between pictorial style and artistic individuality from something unconscious to a fully self-conscious relationship. He is not merely trying pass his work off undetected as the work of someone else: by employing self-portraiture, and (self-)portraying Smikros in an implausible social situation, he invites his viewers to look again at the work, and begin to ask questions

about who Smikros might be, and perhaps even to begin to suspect that Smikros is too good to be true. That consequential claim I hope to substantiate in the first chapter of this book.

Here, too, there is an analog within early Greek culture, and again, it is within the *Odyssey*. In Book Nineteen, Odysseus finds himself face to face with his wife Penelope after twenty years of separation, but he claims to be someone else. “My own name is Aethon,” he says, as he unfolds his fictitious assertion to be the brother of the Cretan Idomeneus, and describes an encounter with (himself!) Odysseus long before, at the beginning of the Trojan War. “Falsehoods all, but he gave his falsehoods all the ring of truth. As she listened on, her tears flowed . . . weeping for him, her husband, sitting their beside her” (19.203–209, ἴσκε ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα· τῆς δ’ ἄρ’ ἀκουούσης ῥέε δάκρυα . . . κλαιούσης ἐὼν ἄνδρα παρ-ῆμενον). In the second half of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells his own story, in his own words, on five separate occasions, and on each occasion, the tale is different from the one he told the Phaiakians. On two occasions, one being the interview with Penelope, he even gives himself a made-up name. Telling his own story, reinventing it to suit each new situation, is the means by which this hero achieves not only the elusive goal of domestic economic success but also the traditional heroic goal of everlasting fame or *kleos*. One claim of the present book is that a meaningful thread can be traced between those two instances of fictional autobiography, between the epic stranger from Crete and the luxury-loving vase-painter from Athens.

One way to think about the motivation behind Euphronios’ invention of Smikros is along the lines of a speech made by Athena in Book Thirteen of the *Odyssey*. Having detained the hero long enough to hear his entire story, the Phaiakians returned Odysseus, while he slept, to his native island. Upon awaking, and encountering a young herdsman, and learning that he was in fact returned to his home after twenty years, the hero prevaricates: “Ithaka—I’ve heard of it” (13.256, “πυνθανόμην Ἰθάκης”). The young man, who turns out to be Athena, amused, offers this appreciation of the greatest liar in Western civilization: “any man—any god who met you—would have to be some champion lying cheat to get past *you* for all-round craft and guile! . . . [N]ot even here, on native soil, would you give up those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!” (13.291–295).¹⁶ One way to imagine the patron or viewer of the vase-painting in Brussels (plate I) is to imagine an Athena-like spectator, who sees through the ruse of the signature *Smikros egraphsen*, and is pleased with herself, because she has matched wits with the cleverest of artists and not lost. But this is not the only way to imagine the response to Smikros as a fictional, self-portraying vase-painter. In Book Seventeen, Eumaios offers a different appreciation of the words of Odysseus to Penelope. At the moment the swineherd offers them, he is not even aware that the man who has been

staying with him for three days is the hero himself. “My queen . . . you know how you can stare at a bard in wonder . . . how you can long to sit there, listening, all your life when the man begins to sing. So he charmed my heart, I tell you, huddling there beside me at my fire” (17.518–521).¹⁷ Eumaios says this having already acknowledged, tacitly, in Book Fourteen, that at least one of the personal anecdotes related by the stranger is an *ainos*, a “fable” (14.508), a story creatively shaped to serve an ulterior purpose. In the passage in Book Seventeen, it is implied, the personal anecdotes of the stranger are so pleasurable to experience that it hardly matters whether they are true or false.¹⁸ Here is a different model of how a patron or symposiast or viewer might respond, enchanted, to the pictorial inventions of Euphronios.

Two comparisons for the pictorial proposition on the stamnos in Brussels (plate I) have been presented, but are they of the same value or nature? *Las Meninas* (plate II) is heuristic in the sense that it underscores the rarity of the self-portrait of the artist-in-society, foregrounds the potential ideological challenge to incorporating painter and patron into the same image, and makes apparent by contrast several special features of the vase-painting. The *Odyssey* is a different kind of comparison. It is not merely culturally related in the general sense of being Greek. It is both representative as well as constitutive of a particular form or model of subjectivity circulating in early Greek poetry and art.¹⁹ The *Odyssey* may have been much more influential than the Brussels vase-painting, but both are manifestations of the same specific cultural concept.

A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THIS BOOK

The aim of this book is to track the occurrence of the cultural concept of the “Odysseus”-like artist or poet: that is, the conception of the artist or poet as a socially marginal, sometimes physically imperfect, prevaricator, who triumphs artistically through an ability to fictionalize—lie about—the self. There are two more-or-less distinct bundles of threads binding together the poetic and pictorial instantiations of the creative liar, which come close to each other around the figure of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. One is found in the Archaic poetry of Archilochos and Hipponax (chapters two and three), the other in the figure of Hephaistos (chapters four and five). Hephaistos provides an explicit link between the poetry and the art examined in this book, because the god is a significant feature of both Homeric epic (chapter four) and Athenian vase-painting (chapters five and six).

The poetry associated with Archilochos and Hipponax is important because it provides evidence of the reception of two features of the epic presentation of Odysseus within later Greek culture. One feature is the self-narration of personal experience, while the other is the fictionalization of the self in first-person narrative. There is a compelling argument that the epic persona of

Odysseus is envisioned as a paradigm of a poetic narrator in the poetry of the seventh-century Archilochos of Paros (chapter two). We know that several of his first-person narrators possessed names or identities other than “Archilochos.” Like the vase in Brussels, the poems did not make the fictional identity of the speaker explicit, either at the beginning of the poem or possibly at all. That the example of Odysseus may be behind or relevant to that mode of narration is suggested by numerous other Archilochean poems. The infamous poem, “Some Saian exults in my shield which I left—a faultless weapon—beside a bush against my will. But I saved myself. What do I care about that shield? To hell with it! I’ll get one that’s just as good another time” (fragment 5W, ἀσπίδι μὲν Σαῖων τις ἀγάλλεται, ἦν παρὰ θάμνῳ, ἔντος ἀμώμητον, κάλλιπον οὐκ ἐθέλων· αὐτὸν δ’ ἐξεσάωσα. τί μοι μέλει ἀσπίς ἐκείνη; ἔρρέτω· ἑξαῦτις κτήσομαι οὐ κακίῳ), was received as a shocking counter-cultural sentiment in some circles in antiquity. But it finds an excellent precedent in one of the epic fictional autobiographies of Odysseus.

A similar fascination with Odysseus, from his physical appearance to his actions and words, can be traced in the remains of the sixth-century poet Hipponax (chapter three). In Hipponax, there are additional features that occur in, are relevant to, the vase-painting. One is an interest in entering into emulation or competition with the pictorial or sculptural arts. In several poems, the narrator interacts with visual artists who appear, like Smikros, to be inventions. Hipponax not only interacts with them on a social level, competing for the attention of a woman, settling personal scores, but also interacts with the art that they make. In so doing, the aim of the poetry seems to be to explore the relative capabilities and limitations of the poetic, pictorial, and sculptural media. One would compare Leonardo’s writings about the relative capacities of pictures, poetry, and music, if the poetry of Hipponax were not also characterized by parody (that is, by a deliberate strategy of undermining traditional or conventional expectations for the sake of humor, a strategy arguably at work in a number of vase-paintings discussed in this book). The vase-painting in Brussels was painted at time when a poet occasionally reached across the line into the field of painting not merely for content but also for formal or conceptual possibilities. The vase can be understood to represent that process of intellectual exchange run in reverse.

A link between the hero of the *Odyssey* and the self-presentation of the artist in Archaic Greek culture is also manifest in the conception of Hephaistos (chapters four and five). In the literary and pictorial representations of this god, there is revealed a fascinating series of interrelationships among clever traps, technical knowledge, artistry, physical deformity, and social rejection. Because of his withered legs, Hephaistos is banished from the society and very sight of the Olympian gods despite his filial membership. His banishment provides the time, opportunity, and impetus to develop technical knowledge