Prologue: The Sirens' Song

The Spell of the Sirens

The Sirens may well be the most arresting of the miraculous forces that the Homeric Odysseus has to brave.[1] Circe warns him against the power of their song: he who comes under its spell will forget about his *nostos* and rot in anonymity on their shore (*Od*. 12.41–4). As he is advised by Circe, Odysseus renders his companions immune to the danger by sealing their ears with wax. He himself listens to the Sirens, bound to the mast of the ship and therefore unable to follow their alluring call: 'Come this way, honoured Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans,/ and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing;/ for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship/ until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues/ from our lips; then he goes on, well pleased, knowing more than ever/ he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans/ did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite./ Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens'. (*Od*. 12.184–91).

The metapoetic significance of the Sirens is widely acknowledged. Commenting on the Sirens' advertisement of their song, the Byzantine scholar Eustathius notes: '"well pleased" and "knowing more than ever" are the goal of poetry' (*ad Od*. 12.188). The song promised by the Sirens evokes epic poetry in particular.[2] The boast of omniscience aligns the Sirens with the Muses into whose fountain Homer taps. The Trojan War, singled out from the Sirens' infinite knowledge, is the subject of the other great Homeric epic, the *Iliad*. The reference is reinforced by the vocabulary in which the Sirens' address is couched; 'great glory of the Achaeans', for instance, has a distinctly Iliadic ring.[3] At the same time, the fate awaiting Odysseus on the shores of the Sirens contrasts poignantly with the imperishable glory that Homeric epic claims to generate. While Achilles gains eternal fame by

[1] The scholarly literature is vast; see, for example, Pucci 1979, 1987: 209–13; Ledbetter 2003: 27–34; Peponi 2012: 70–94.
[2] Lyrical resonances are discussed by Peponi 2012: 76–80.
[3] Pucci 1979.

choosing death in Troy over a return home, Odysseus, following the allure of the Sirens, would gamble away his glory as well as his life and *nostos*. The Sirens are 'Muses of Hades',[4] their song 'a ghastly imitation of epic'.[5]

The most notable feature of the Sirens is the spell they cast on their audience (*Od.* 12.41–3): 'a man/ who unsuspecting approaches them, and listens to the Sirens/ singing, has no prospect of coming home . . .' In ancient literature, the Sirens became synonymous with the irresistible spell of the spoken word. In the *Symposium*, for example, Alcibiades compares Socrates with the Sirens (216a), confessing that he always succumbs to his arguments and is in danger of 'becoming old sitting by his side'. Moving to the imperial period, to Heliodorus' novel *Ethiopica*, we hear Cnemon state that he is eager to listen to Calasiris' narration for days and nights to come for 'there is something insatiable and siren-like to it' (5.1.4). Unique as they are, the Sirens highlight the enchantment that Homer ascribes to song in general.[6] Bards such as Phemius and Demodocus know how to enthrall their listeners. When Odysseus lauds Demodocus for singing about the fall of Troy 'as if you had been there yourself or heard it from one who was' (8.491), his praise is directed at the vividness of the account as well as its factual accuracy.[7] In the mouth of the Sirens, this immersive capacity of song is further intensified. The aesthetic experience induced by the Sirens is so powerful that it eclipses real life experience: art not only generates life-like experiences, it fully replaces life.[8]

The spell emanating from the Sirens appears not only to hinge on the beauty of their voices.[9] The reference to the content of their song, notably the Trojan War, intimates that the stories sung also matter. In accordance with this, Penelope mentions the 'bewitching actions of mortals and gods which the singers celebrate' (1.337–8). Here the content, not the form of song is qualified as 'bewitching'. This does not mean that the quality of singing is irrelevant, but it is clear that an exciting story is needed to enchant an audience. Note that plain story-telling can have effects similar to those of bardic performance. After Odysseus in the guise of the beggar has given an account of his life, Eumaeus claims to be 'bewitched' and compares him to

[4] Pucci 1987: 212.
[5] Segal 1994: 103.
[6] On the poetics embedded in the *Odyssey*, see, for example, Marg 1957: 7–20; Segal 1994: 85–109; Halliwell 2011: 36–92; Peponi 2012.
[7] Cf. Halliwell 2011: 85–6.
[8] My interpretation is nuanced differently from Peponi 2012. Peponi also argues for a fusion, but where I see the immersion of Odysseus in the world of the song, she finds the fusion between listener and performer (91).
[9] Cf. Halliwell 2011: 48 n. 20. See already Cic. *fin.* 5.18, who emphasizes human curiosity.

a singer (17.518–21). Like song, the artful telling of a story can induce rapt absorption in its recipients. An immersive capacity seems to reside in narrative, whether it has the form of song or a prose account.

One of the most acute interpretations of Odysseus and the Sirens stems from Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno.[10] For them, the *Odyssey* aptly illustrates the dialectics of enlightenment. There is a continuous process of rationalization from mimetic to mythic to metaphysical and finally to positivist world-views, and yet every stage of enlightenment somehow perpetuates the mythical features it tries to discard. The Sirens form part of the adventures in which sly Odysseus overcomes the old mythical order, but he does so only by submitting himself to its sway. In order to dismiss the Sirens, he has to listen to their song. In the reading of Horkheimer and Adorno, the Sirens episode reveals specifically the 'entwinement of myth, rule and labour'.[11] While the relationship between Odysseus and his comrades mirrors the antagonism between bourgeoisie and working class, the Sirens represent nature, which the ruse of Odysseus domesticates and 'degrades' (*entmächtigt*, 39) to art. The Siren episode showcases the way that the bourgeois indulgence in art hinges on the exploitation of labour as a means of mastering nature: 'In this way the enjoyment of art and manual work diverge as the primeval world is left behind. The epic already contains the correct theory. Between the cultural heritage and enforced work here is a precise correlation, and both are founded on the inescapable compulsion toward the social control of nature'.[12]

Much can be said about this ingenious reading, which uses a seemingly archaic text to illuminate ultimately the lapse into barbarism that Horkheimer and Adorno had been witnessing.[13] For my purposes here, it is crucial what their interpretation does not notice: Horkheimer and Adorno sideline the immersive capacity of song so central to the Homeric passage, considering it only as an element of the pre-civilized world that Odysseus is about to leave behind. This is not incidental. There is not much room for aesthetic experience in a concept that envisages art primarily in its relation

[10] Horkheimer and Adorno 1988 (1944): 50–87 (English tr. 35–62); on the Sirens, 38–49 (English tr. 25–34).

[11] Horkheimer and Adorno 1988 (1944): 38 (English tr. 25).

[12] Horkheimer and Adorno 1988 (1944): 41 (English tr. 27): 'So treten Kunstgenuß und Handarbeit im Abschied von der Vorwelt auseinander. Das Epos enthält bereits die richtige Theorie. Das Kulturgut steht zur kommandierten Arbeit in genauer Korrelation, und beide gründen im unentrinnbaren Zwang zur gesellschaftlichen Herrschaft über die Natur'.

[13] See Porter 2010b for a fascinating exploration of the political background of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

to ideology. Art has the capacity to unveil the truth, and yet it is liable to become the disguise in which ideology permeates even its own critique. We thus have to be constantly on our guard; indulgence without reflection is the target of massive critique, even contempt in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*.[14] Under Adorno's sway, a generation of intellectuals, at least in Europe, tried hard not to be carried away by catchy tunes and felt guilty for identifying with James Bond in the movie theatre.

While Critical Theory's take on art is very distinct, its distrust of the strong responses that art can elicit is emblematic of a broader tendency in twentieth-century criticism. Post-structuralism in particular contributed to the disregard for aesthetic experience. The very idea of experience was shunned by a philosophy that replaced subjects with discourses and dissolved presence into traces: 'As to the concept of experience, it is very unfortunate here . . . it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure'.[15] Without a role in the interplay between signifiers and signifieds, aesthetic experience fared badly under the auspices of the linguistic turn. Even Roland Barthes' concept of *jouissance*, the voluptuous reading, denies the reader an immersion in the fictive universe and instead aims at her masochistic disfiguration in plays of signification.[16]

In the Anglo-American tradition, John Dewey had devoted a penetrating investigation to aesthetic experience, but his heritage soon dwindled.[17] The notion of aesthetic experience became more and more confined in the course of the controversy between M. C. Beardsley and George Dickie.[18] In major analytical theories of art, it played no role. While aesthetic experience has no place in Nelson Goodman's semiological agenda, A. C. Danto denies it relevance to the definition of (modern) art.[19] As another analytical aesthetician, Noel Carroll, observes, 'aesthetic experience, the very fulcrum of aestheticism, has been put on the back burner, if not taken off the stove altogether'.[20]

There were of course dissenting voices that ought not to be silenced: Susan Sontag, for instance, polemicized 'against interpretation' and advanced an 'erotics of reading'.[21] In France, Mikel Dufrenne developed a phenomenological model of aesthetics, while the German writer Karl Heinz Bohrer,

[14] Adorno 1970.
[15] Derrida 1967a: 89.
[16] Barthes 1973.
[17] Dewey 1934.
[18] Cf. Beardsley 1958; 1982; Dickie 1974.
[19] Goodman 1968; Danto 1986.
[20] Carroll 2001: 42–3.
[21] Sontag 1966.

tapping into the heritage of Romanticism and walking on Ernst Jünger's *blutbetauten Wiesen*, spoke of suddenness and violence as salient traits of aesthetic experience.[22] And yet only more recently has a pervasive interest in the experiential dimension of art emerged.[23] Together with presence and materiality, experience has been marshalled to spice up the diet prescribed by the linguistic turn. One of the most outspoken advocates of this movement is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who argues that we relate to the world in ways that are not fully captured by hermeneutic understanding or semiotic analysis. The paradigm of meaning, Gumbrecht proclaims, needs to be complemented by the notion of presence.[24]

The experiential dimension of our responses to art is also stressed by authors who take their inspiration from cognitive studies. This field of research is still very much in the process of finding its shape and the variety of approaches and methodologies used make it difficult to trace even its outline. While some works draw on psychological investigations, others are indebted to phenomenology and an increasing wave of studies refers to neuroscientific research.[25] That being said, there is a strong tendency in this dynamic field to show that our response to art is not cognitive in a narrow, but in a broader sense, that, instead of processing artworks merely intellectually, we are also affected emotionally and physically by them. A crucial insight is the embodied nature of our cognition, which also applies to aesthetic experiences. When for example we read about a physical activity or see it visually represented, our sensorimotor system seems to echo these motions.[26]

It is a central goal of this book to bring ancient material into a fruitful dialogue with this newly awakened interest in aesthetic experience.[27] Not only will the current discussion permit us to see the heritage of antiquity with fresh eyes, but ancient reflections can significantly enrich the present exploration of aesthetic experience. The notions of presence and experience tend to be seen in the light of our contemporary world, as they offer convenient antidotes to what critics diagnose as increasing virtuality. Due

[22] Dufrenne 1967; Bohrer 1994 (1981).
[23] For a survey of the idea of experience in modern intellectual history, see Jay 2005.
[24] See, for example, Gumbrecht 2004. While Gumbrecht's account of presence is impressionistic, philosophers have presented similar ideas in a more scholarly vein. See, for example, Mersch 2002a, 2002b; Seel 2003.
[25] For a psychologically inspired approach to narrative, see, e.g., Gerrig 1993; for neo-phenomenology, Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; for the influence of neuro-science, e.g., Damasio 1999.
[26] For an attempt to make this approach fruitful for Classics, see Grethlein and Huitink 2017, who use an enactive approach to explain the condundrum of Homer's vividness.
[27] See Grethlein 2015d for a first presentation of the idea.

to their experimental background, cognitive studies per se lack a historical dimension. Ancient texts are a forceful reminder that there is a history to aesthetic experience, that it loomed large in Greco-Roman antiquity.[28] Needless to say, the meditations of ancient authors do not fully map onto our current debate. This, however, is what makes them so thought-provoking. It is the very chasm that allows ancient texts to cast light on present concerns.

To give an example: It is striking that the new advocates of aesthetic experience in Philosophy and Criticism tend to focus on visual arts, be it the traditional tableau, installations, or performances. Narrative is, if mentioned at all, rarely considered. While arguing for a radical extension in the range of the objects of aesthetic experience, Gumbrecht nonetheless shares the general disdain for narrative. In an article discussing the possibility of achieving presence in language, he notes 'that language can produce epiphanies in which the past is made present'.[29] However, 'this . . . evokes exceptional situations and achievements that have to be wrested, so to speak, from, and even against the grain of, the (for us) normal functioning of language'. Gumbrecht juxtaposes 'an analogical way of using language (presentification)' with 'a digital one (narrative or description)'. Given that the new interest in aesthetic experience is a move against the linguistic turn, the inclination to bypass narrative is not surprising. And yet ancient texts speak loudly against the idea that narrative is only a means of representation (as opposed to presence). The Sirens in Homer are a case in point that highlights the capacity of narrative to trigger strong experiences in its recipients.

Cognitively inspired scholars are more sensitive to the experiental dimension of narrative, and yet they are also in danger of downplaying important aspects that can be gleaned from ancient texts. In his *Thinking with Literature*, a splendid exploration of what cognitive theory can contribute to literary criticism, Terence Cave highlights his disagreement with post-Kantian aesthetics and claims that literature does not belong to a special aesthetic domain.[30] And yet, the shackles that bind Odysseus to the mast subtly gesture towards the specific frame which distinguishes aesthetic from other experiences. As visceral as they may be, aesthetic experiences

[28] Porter 2010a makes a strong case for the salience of experience to ancient aesthetics.

[29] Gumbrecht 2006: 325.

[30] Cave 2016: 3–4. For further cognitively inspired explorations of experience in narrative, see the pioneering study of Fludernik 1996; Kuzmičová 2012; Troscianko 2014; Caracciolo 2014 and the handbook edited by Zunshine 2015. From alternative perspectives, see also Ryan 2001, who takes her cue from studies in Virtual Reality; Felski 2008; 2015, who meditates on the enchantment and attachment of readers; Macé 2011, who elaborates on the close entwinement of reading with our everyday existence.

take place in the frame of 'as-if'. Just as Odysseus is not transfixed by the Sirens' song, readers may be enthralled but will not lose a residual awareness of attending to a representation. In the course of the argument, we will encounter highly nuanced reflections in ancient texts on the balance between immersion and distance that defines the reading process.

Eyeing the Sirens' Song

Aesthetic Experiences and Classical Antiquity not only establishes a dialogue between ancient narrative and modern theory; it also sets out to view modern theory in light of ancient pictures. While the emphasis on the strong responses elicited by ancient narrative alerts us to a blind spot in today's aesthetics, ancient visual culture seems to sit much more comfortably with current theory. In addition to cognitive investigations of the emotional and embodied dimension of our perception of pictures,[31] Art History has seen a powerful trend to argue that pictures are more than the passive objects of our gaze. Pictures, it is argued, affect their beholders, they are active and have lives of their own. The ancient record seems to sustain such claims and is frequently conjured up by the advocates of the agency of pictures. Ancient images and statues of gods were more than representations; they somehow made divinities present. Besides religion, the erotic spell, tangible in the Pygmalion myth, for example, blurs the boundary between art and life.[32] This, however, is not the full picture, so to speak. I will argue that some ancient pictures, in highlighting their own pictorial status, militate (metaphorically!) against ascribing agency to images. Not only ancient narrative, but also ancient pictures are good to think with.

A brief look at ancient representations of the Sirens directs us to the point that will be crucial for my argument about pictures. Homer abstains completely from describing the Sirens. What has given Homerists a headache[33] is in fact a highly effective narrative strategy: by granting the Sirens direct speech, while spending no words on their visual appearance, Homer slyly foregrounds their most remarkable feature, namely their song.[34] Now painters trying to represent the Sirens face a problem that reverses Homer's narrative

[31] E.g. Freedberg 2007; Freedberg and Gallese 2007.
[32] See below Chapter 6.
[33] E.g. Heubeck ad 12.39–54, who calls it one of the 'two main difficulties' that the account of the Sirens episode is so short 'at the expense of any detail of the Sirens' appearance or descent'.
[34] Cf. Ledbetter 2003: 29, who points out that even the distance of the Sirens is expressed in auditive terms.

Figure P.1 Odysseus and the Sirens, Attic red-figured *stamnos* by Siren Painter, British Museum, 480–470 BCE

strategy. What characterizes the Sirens, song, cannot be represented visually. At least not directly: depictions of the Sirens and Odysseus in various media and from different periods reveal apt strategies for how to visualize song.[35]

While the *Odyssey* treats the Sirens as a pair, most paintings feature three Sirens who are grouped around Odysseus' ship. A red-figured *stamnos*, for example, shows the ship amidst two rocks, with a Siren standing on each one, while a third Siren seems to plunge onto the ship, head first and with closed eyes (Figure P.1).[36] Or take a Pompeian wall-painting on show in

[35] It may be worth noting in this context the so-called '*Augensirenen*' on Attic vases, sirens with an eye embedded in their bodies, cf. Steinhart 1995: 22–8. However, as far as I can see, there are no depictions of '*Augensirenen*' together with Odysseus.

[36] London, BM 1843.11–3.31; ARV 289.1, 1642; CVA, London British Museum 3, III.I.c, PLS. (185) 20.1 A+C. The plunge of the Siren is often interpreted as suicide, cf. Hofstetter 1990: 130,

Figure P.2 Odysseus and the Sirens, Pompeian wall painting, British Museum, 50–75 CE

the British Museum: one Siren is on a rock far in the back on the left side, a second and third are located on rocks on the right side (Figure P.2).[37] The distribution of Sirens may follow compositional considerations, but it also mimics the pervasiveness of sound which spreads in all directions.

The sound itself is often presented indexically. Many painters have endowed their Sirens with instruments. On a black-figured Athenian *lekythos* (Figure P.3), Odysseus is in between two Sirens, one playing the *aulos*, the other the *kithara*.[38] The use of colours, black for Odysseus' head and

who relates it to the later literary tradition, notably in Lycoph. *Alexandra* 714ff.; von den Hoff 2009: 58.

[37] London, BM 1867.5–8.1354.

[38] National Museum, Athens, CC 958; ABV 476.1.

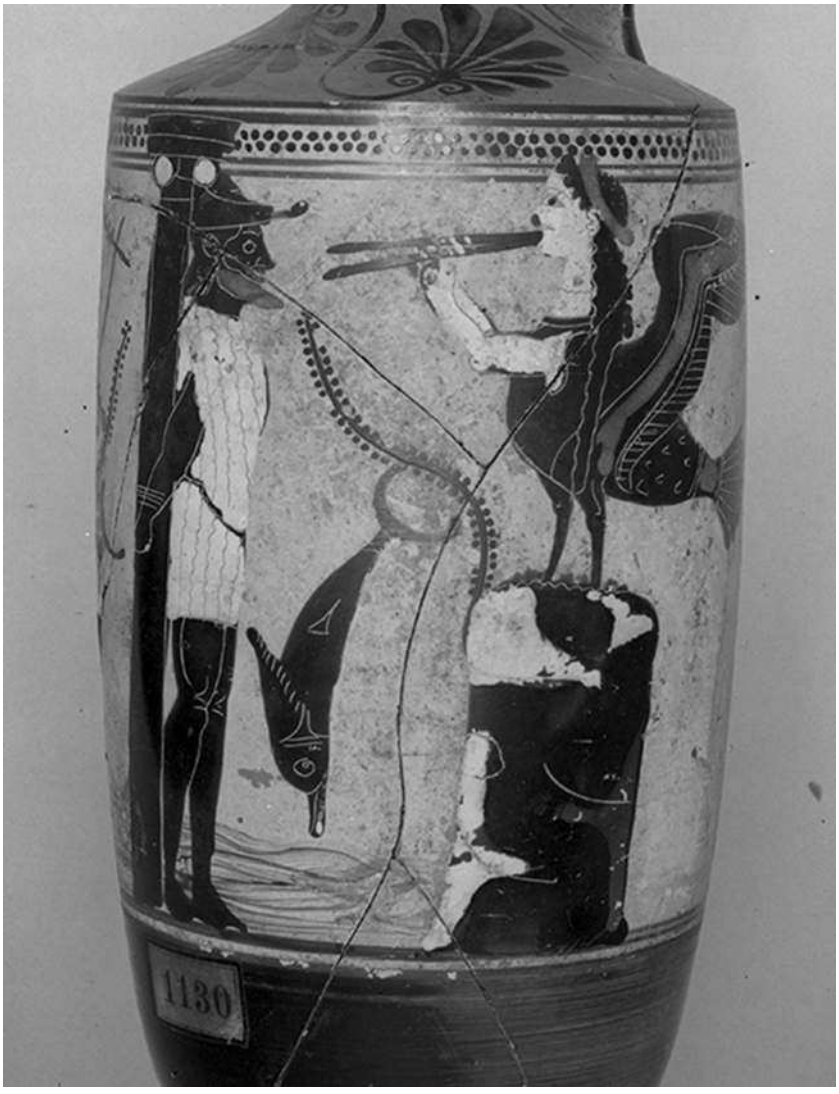

Figure P.3 Odysseus and the Sirens, Attic black-figured *lekythos* by Edinburgh Painter, Athens, National Museum, 525–475 BCE

body, white for the head and arms of the Sirens, underscores the contrast between the silent Odysseus and the sound-producing Sirens. The Pompeian wall-painting in the British Museum features one Siren with *aulos*, one with *kithara*, and one who is singing. On the London *stamnos*, the Sirens have no instruments, but together with the name Himeropa ascribed to one of them, their open mouths indicate singing.