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## **Tricky Turnings of the Screw(ed): The Poetic, Ethical, and Erotic Mystery of Self-Reflexive Fakery and Illusion**

**by Brian W. Nowlin**

Perhaps one of the first proto-potboiler textual moments in the Western tradition, a scene that overtly involves the narrative delights of mystification and detection, occurs in the midst of *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* when an exasperated Apollo, searching for his stolen cattle, confronts a crime simultaneously carried out and covered up by a master trickster, a hermetic thief skilled in the art of directly committing indirections marked by a surfeit élan of self-conscious duplicity. Hermes not only spreads sand over the ashes of his cattle-killing sacrificial fire, but also, by ensuring that the cattle walk *backwards* whilst being led from their place of abduction to their doom, and by attaching twigs and leaves to his feet, creates a trail of deceptive signs that confounds even the divine reading skills of the master augur Apollo. As does any gifted mystery writer, Hermes crafts enigmatic tracks, signs pointing to a veiled meaning, that signify not only a particular crime but a particular style of subtlety and indirection, a delight *for its own sake* in the imaginative inventiveness of deception. By the end of the *Hymn*, Apollo's firm sense of outraged bafflement (the straight-arrow Apollo is after all a god of rationalistic and traditionalist propriety and truth-telling) has, in and through the adventure of "reading" Hermes's self-reflexively deceptive "texts," softened into a humorous delight in and appreciation for Hermes's inveterate thefts and fabrications.

Much has been made of *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Lewis Hyde, in his *Trickster Makes This World*, a book that wonderfully takes up trickster in both its content and its meandering manner of proceeding, offers a detailed reading of the *Hymn* as a way of demonstrating (with some help from the semiotic theorizing of Umberto Eco) that the process of signification, and with it of imaginative reflection, is possible only because signs, in order to function as semantic markers that can point to something, are inherently duplicitous. As Eco puts it: "[S]emiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything *which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all" (60). I shall not reduplicate here Hyde's provocative reading of the *Hymn* and its semiotic implications, but I begin with Hermes and his *Hymn* as a way to invoke a mythological meta-narrative that concerns itself with the delights of detection, the joys of following alluring tracks into the realm of inventive deception—these joys and delights, and more specifically their overt figuration *within* several literary and cinematic narratives, will be the major concern of this essay. The *Hymn*, by making thematic the act of interpretation in a context of mystery and deception, reveals a truth about all mystery narratives: both the mystery writer's and the villain's delight in duplicity rub off on attentive readers. Lured through page after page, we enjoy the adventure of being tricked because on some level such trickery reminds us that our firm convictions about the world (what exactly the golden cattle of Apollo signify, as it were) can be played with, for such convictions are themselves the result of inventive fabrications spun in those hermetic boundaries or thresholds where the culture's dominant narratives are interwoven with our own. Mystery narratives, in other words, are essentially provocative games of epistemological striptease, and in their inherently poetic, ethical, and erotic proddings, they inspire us to re-imagine the world.

The *Hymn* teaches another lesson: Hermes is ultimately granted a full place of honor with the rest of the Olympians not despite but because of his trickery. Unfortunately, the hermetic trickery of mystery narratives has not typically achieved the same recognition vis-à-vis the Olympus of institutionalized literary criticism, which throughout much of its history has relegated mystery and detective fiction to the realm of kitsch and popular entertainment. To be sure, there are important exceptions to the haughty dismissal of mystery narratives: Michael Holquist, for example, argues that “what the structural and philosophical presuppositions of myth and depth psychology were to Modernism (Mann, Joyce, Woolf, etc.), the detective story is to Post-Modernism (Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Nabokov, etc.)... [and] if such is the case, we will have established a relationship between two levels of culture, kitsch and the avant-garde, often thought to be mutually exclusive” (135). Nevertheless, even when mystery narratives are taken seriously by literary critics, their delicate delights are all too often mangled by the heavy-handed theoretical machinations of criticism.

A prime example of a mystery story that remains infinitely more interesting than its criticism is also a rare case of the undeniable conjoining of the mystery genre, high art, and sustained critical attention: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, a brief discussion of which will serve to highlight in an emblematic way literary criticism’s failure to do full justice to the allure of mystery. The story of the history of the various interpretations of James’s novella could indeed itself be seen as a mystery text, for a whole host of reductive-minded critics have attempted to solve what *really* happens at the country house of Bly: What exactly did Miles say at school? Are the ghosts real? Is the narrator to be trusted? Despite ever-blossoming psycho-social and psycho-sexual readings (among others), however, James’s novella, which above all in its rhetorical and structural frame underscores the drama of uncertainty essential to writing and reading a mystery story, remains elusive, provoking but never satisfying the urge univocally to prove the precise nature of the events the story unfolds. As Jonathan Levin points out, critics who attempt to solve the mystery of the novella in a reductive fashion fall into James’s trap, fixing in psychologisms the dynamic flow of relations that is the reality of the story. The ultimate mystery revealed through a sustained engagement with *The Turn of the Screw* is that the semantic center of the novella is, paradoxically, an “indeterminate suffusing fringe” (Levin 122). James himself acknowledges as much: “The study is of a conceived ‘tone,’ the tone of suspected and felt trouble, of an inordinate and incalculable sort—the tone of tragic, yet of exquisite, mystification” (James 1185). Suspected and incalculable mystification *is* the intuited secret of James’s ghost story, an incontrovertibly ambiguous mystery hiding within a facade of graspable, solvable reality. Again to quote from James’s commentary: “[*The Turn of the Screw*] is a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught (the ‘fun’ of the capture of the merely witless being ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious” (1184-85). Jaded, disillusioned, and fastidious—does this not describe the typical literary critic?

As the above remarks of James demonstrate, in the case of *The Turn of the Screw* the true perpetrator of deceptions, of semantic crimes, as it were, is James himself, acting as a kind of authorial trickster who has the impertinence to locate the typical plot of the mystery story not within his novella but without, in the interpretive act of reading in which readers become detectives seeking to delve between the lines of a prose style that—and *this* is the deceptive mystery of the story—is always already taking place between the lines. James’s story of mystification thus reveals only in a negative sense the delights of mystery narratives: the delight,

really, is all James's, for it is only marginally inscribed within his narrative itself. Despite all of the critical attention paid to it, therefore, and despite the fact that it is a better critic to its critics than vice versa, *The Turn of the Screw* does not, like the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, figuratively enact the narrative delights of mystification and detection. A further turn of *The Turn of the Screw* is needed, and this is especially so if the full poetic, ethical, and erotic components of narrative deception are to be evoked.

In what follows, then, I shall take up, guided by the example of the *Hymn*, aspects of one literary narrative and two cinematic narratives that themselves offer a better critical commentary on the delights and complexities of mystery stories than does most literary criticism. The three narratives discussed—Homer's *Odyssey*, Orson Welles's *F for Fake*, and Radley Metzger's *The Lickerish Quartet* (alternately released as *Erotic Illusion* and *Hide and Seek*)—are not typical works of mystery or detective fiction per se, but rather what might be termed meta-mysteries, works that inscribe within their textures self-reflexive exercises in fakery and illusion, and thereby make thematic the dynamics and implications of narrative mystery. In essence, these three works come at mystery from the inside out, for the paradoxical attempt to detect or decode a *known* fake or a *willed* illusion is inseparable from the effort directly to apprehend the duplicitous, inventive energies that animate all mysteries and that both create and disrupt the boundary markers that constitute a culture's particular sense of reality at any one time. The mystery of mystery—in other words, of the motivations for and the delight in the kind of duplicitous trickery that problematizes established notions of reality—is at issue in these works. In each case, the reader or viewer is put on the trail of that most self-conscious of criminals, that master of constructed lies and fraudulent fakery: the actor. Whether it is the ever-turning, ever-troping Odysseus in the poem that bears his name; or art forger Elmyr de Hory, biographical hoaxer Clifford Irving, and directorial trickster Orson Welles (and others) in *F for Fake*; or the mysterious young woman who spins—and/or is spun into—erotic illusions in *The Lickerish Quartet*, these characters and the works in which they trickily move illustrate that in the human realm to act is to some extent always to *act*: we are all fakers putting on a show, particularly when we are being most “authentic,” for the nature of human consciousness is such that action is largely always already imitation of action; human action is fundamentally imitative or poetic. As George Burns once put it: “The most important thing about acting is honesty; if you can fake that you've got it made” (Davis xviii). These works, by making thematic the tricks and games at the heart of mystery's allure, illuminate the way that more typical, traditional mystery narratives challenge us to detect a mode of duplicitous acting—perpetrated by characters and authors alike—that, though it may be aberrantly criminal in the case of most mystery tales, has affinities with what we are doing in our actions (particularly our verbal actions) all the time: we improvise the truth because our minds are fundamentally trickster-based, immersed in a play of signs that can tell the truth only because they simultaneously whisper the truth's lie. To recognize the inherent semiotic duplicity of human endeavors, and to “act” (in both senses of the term) accordingly, is, as these works will show, both an inherently ethical and a fundamentally erotic endeavor inseparable from the creative play of trickster, and trickster's ways can never be fully circumscribed within or commodified by the semantic formulations of institutionalized values.

An admission: To group an ancient poetic text with two avant-garde films from the 1970's is overtly to disregard critical conventions that would rigidly honor differences of culture, artistic medium, and genre, but since trickster rules this journal, I just may be able to get away with such brazen boundary crossings (only a hermetic alchemy of the trickiest variety could

facilitate the happy commingling of Homeric studies and Metzger's artsy erotica). Regardless, part of the method of my madness is to demonstrate that "mystery" as a locus of critical inquiry is far more fecund than typically realized. The topic of mystery not only raises fundamental semiotic questions about the meaning-making propensities of human consciousness and linguistic practice, but also calls into question all too-sharp distinctions between "high" and "low" forms of art. Indeed, as the following discussion of *F for Fake* in particular indicates, such critical distinctions can always be undone by mysterious tricksters who recognize that all art is born in a murky realm where the line between high and low, or real and fake, is hard to draw. All of the works treated in this essay delight in subverting the kind of distinctions that many critics, as assessors of artistic "value," rely on for critical commerce.

A further admission: the three sections that follow are not meant to be argumentatively definitive. Rather, in their trickster-inspired improvisation and digression, they intend solely to evoke—not to prove—the poetic, ethical, and erotic components of self-reflexive narrative deception. Much further work undoubtedly deserves to be done on this topic, but it is hoped that what follows will at least prod readers to return to—or to visit for the first time—the delights of the works discussed, perhaps seeing them with new eyes: the twinkling, winking eyes of trickster!

### **Narrative Deception is Poetic: Polytropic Odysseus**

Certainly one of the most charming scenes in all of Western literature occurs in Book XIII of Homer's *Odyssey*<sup>i</sup> when the mortal Odysseus and the goddess Athene share a moment of mutual deception and recognition that leads to a kind of *tour de force* celebration of the wily art of lying. Herself physically disguised in the form of a young shepherd, Athene provokes in Odysseus one of his typical verbal disguises: unknowingly deposited at long last in his native Ithaca, Odysseus claims to be a recently-arrived, booty-carrying Cretan fugitive who has killed a son of the king of Crete. In response to this characteristically Odyssean lie, Athene irrepressibly smiles, fondly reaches her hand out to Odysseus, and instantaneously likens her body to a woman "[l]ovely and tall and skilled in glorious tasks" (XIII.289). She then says,

"Cunning would he be and deceitful, who could overreach you  
In various wiles, and even if a god should confront you.  
Versatile-minded wretch, insatiate in wiles, you would not  
Cease from deceits though you are in your own land,  
Or from fraudulent stories that from the ground up are dear to you." (XIII.291-295)<sup>ii</sup>

In praising Odysseus's versatile-minded wiliness, Athene celebrates the homecoming of Ithaca's long-lost leader, the precise kind of leader that, twenty-six hundred years or so after Homer, Oscar Wilde hoped would reappear in the late nineteenth century:

That some change will take place before this century has drawn to its close we have no doubt whatsoever. Bored by the tedious and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance, tired of the intelligent person whose reminiscences are always based on memory, whose statements are invariably limited by probability, and who is at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest

Philistine who happens to be present, Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar. (144)

(Wilde, by the way, would certainly have been willing to transform himself, Athene-like, into either a young shepherd or a lovely and tall woman in order to return society to its lost leader-liar.) Whether cultured and fascinating liars are desirable political leaders (we have recently endured eight years of an administration of liars, though they have not at all been cultured and fascinating) remains an open question, but undeniably Odysseus possesses what Wilde calls the “wit to exaggerate” and the “genius to romance,” and it is just this ineradicable Odyssean *wildness*—the penchant for weaving facts and lies together into an indissoluble whole so as to convey an indirect meaning—that most delights Athene. As Lewis Hyde claims, “[Athene’s] smile is the facial gesture of those who knowingly occupy the space of trickster’s lies, for mind itself is amused by these reversals” (72). Athene’s delight begs two questions in the context of this inquiry: What exactly characterizes Odysseus’s many verbal and physical disguises—his lies—and what does this ancient portrait of “the space of trickster’s lies” have to do with mystery?

To a large extent, all of Odysseus’s tricky turns involve the most practical and pressing of motivations. In the above-mentioned example, the wily son of Laertes launches into a tall tale claiming that he, supposedly a Cretan fugitive, killed a son of the king of Crete because this son ““wanted to deprive me of all my booty / From Troy, for which I had suffered pains in my heart, / Passing through the wars of men and the troublesome waves, / And because I was not graciously willing to serve his father / In the Trojans’ land, but led other men as companions”” (XIII.262-266). Such a web of confabulation exemplifies Odysseus’s lying tales at their most utilitarian: in directly telling the young shepherd that he killed Ortilochos because Ortilochos was after his loot, Odysseus indirectly warns the shepherd about just what kind of fate awaits “him” if he, too, should make an attempt to obtain some of Odysseus’s booty. Not being absolutely certain at this point if the shepherd is a friend or a foe, Odysseus proceeds, in the indirect manner that his lie facilitates, both to feel out the shepherd and thus test the shepherd’s potential either to help or to hurt him, and to warn the shepherd that he, Odysseus-disguised-as-a-Cretan, is a dangerous man. Whether confronted by the ravenous cyclops, the faithful swineherd, the unfaithful suitors, the alluring (and equally-wily) Penelope, the befuddled Laertes, or others, Odysseus relies on lies and disguises that provide a highly practical “cover” to allow the returning king to pursue various material, political, ethical, and sexual ends. At the same time, though—and this is the paradox of Odysseus that has alternately delighted and repulsed poets, dramatists, philosophers, novelists, and classicists down through the ages—Odysseus’s lies betray an irrepressible delight in the activity of verbal and physical deception that at times seems the height of impracticality. What Eva Brann calls Odysseus’s “sheer exuberant mendaciousness” (238) frequently lands Odysseus in a world of trouble and gets his ever-dwindling crew killed.

Pursuing the practical game of deception with an often impractical zest that makes of lying a subtle form of art; simultaneously revealing and concealing his identity by crafting mysterious personas, the unmasking of which is identical to the homecoming that completes the epic—Odysseus is at once a master criminal in and a skilled teller of an alluring mystery tale! And yet, for readers of the poem, as for Athene, the mystery is transparent: we can appreciate—or not—Odysseus’s polytropism, but we are not taken in by it. Thus, when we as readers witness

the various reactions to Odysseus's intertwined mystifications and revelations, we experience the heart of mystery from inside the criminal's or the writer's perspective. The scene with Athene overtly figures within the poem itself this privileged position readers enjoy from which to appreciate the aesthetics of narrative deception, and thus Athene's delight is itself delightful because it mirrors our own. If *The Turn of the Screw* achieves a form of unsatisfied highbrow titillation because one can never beat James at his own game, the *Odyssey* allows readers to beat Odysseus at his, just like Athene. Regardless, the precise nature of Athene's delight (and ours) deserves further attention, for to engage the mystery of such delight is to delve into the inherent delight of mystery.

The delightfulness of Odysseus's inventive deceptions has to do primarily with what might be termed the *poetics* of trickery. Seen through a broad symbolic perspective upon the poem's overall action, Odysseus, in donning his various physical and verbal disguises, is continually imitating the very act of imitation, in other words, Odysseus's actions are imitating the poetic act.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, what Odysseus is most often *doing* in the *Odyssey* is using language to construct likenesses—the very activity of poetry understood in a broad sense. By so overtly figuring the figuring capacity of human beings, Odysseus reveals the fundamentally poetic nature of human action, something that can only be glimpsed when constructed likenesses are seen *as likenesses*, a mode of vision that requires suspending sharp distinctions between true and false, real and imagined. To appreciate with delight, rather than to misapprehend with befuddlement, Odysseus's mysterious self-presentations requires just such a suspension.

The various lies employed by Odysseus in Ithaca are appropriately described as “Cretan” both because Odysseus falsely adopts a Cretan identity and because his lies contain facts about the true Odysseus that are precariously balanced between truth and falsehood—one recalls here the Cretan Liar paradox in which Parmenides, a Cretan, affirms that all Cretans are liars. As Eva Brann puts it, what Odysseus says to his loyal swineherd Eumaeos, for example, is “both fact and deceit, factual deceit” (239), for though the people and places in Odysseus's tales may be factual, and though the events of the tales may themselves reflect, often through a kind of Freudianesque displacement, the true events of Odysseus's adventures, the tales themselves are patently false in a literal sense. The second tall tale that Odysseus, disguised as a lowly beggar and preparing to sleep outside in the cold, relates to his swineherd deserves special attention, since it is a self-reflexive story in which the very trickery involved in the telling of the tale is directly embodied in the content of the tale itself: if within the tale the figure of Odysseus tricks Thoas into leaving his mantle behind for the freezing Cretan, in telling the tale the freezing Odysseus, who in Eumaeos's eyes is the same Cretan from within the story, in a sense “tricks” Eumaeos into giving him a mantle:

“Would that I were in my prime and my strength were steadfast / As when we prepared and led our ambush up under Troy! / Odysseus led [Odysseus has the wonderful chutzpah to include himself as a character in his fictionalized story!], and Menalaos, son of Atreus. / I was third leader among them... [W]hen we arrived before the city and the sheer wall, / We lay around the town in the thick brushwood... And as the North Wind fell off, a bad night came, / A freezing one... Then the other men all had mantles and tunics... But I, when I went, left my mantle with my companions, / Foolishly, since I thought I would not freeze in any case... I shouted out then to Odysseus... ‘Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices, / I shall not be long among the living, but the cold /

Overcomes me. I have no mantle...’ So I said. And then he had this purpose in his heart,  
 / Such a man was he for deliberation and fighting. / Speaking in a little voice, he  
 addressed a speech to me: / ‘Silence now, lest someone else of the Achaians hear you.’ /  
 And he held his head on his elbow and said his speech: / ‘Listen, friends, a godly dream  
 came to me in my sleep. / We have come too far from the ships. Would there were  
 someone / To go tell Agamemnon... That he might urge on more of the men from beside  
 the ships. / So he said. Then Thoas rose up... Hastily. And he took his purple mantle off  
 / And ran to the ships. In that man’s clothing I / Lay gladly.” (XIV.468-501)

On the surface, Odysseus’s lie is a delightful tale that captures the true-to-life resourcefulness and trickery of Odysseus; additionally, though, Odysseus’s lie presents a poetic likeness of the precise kind of attentive, resourceful kindness and hospitality that Odysseus is hoping to provoke in Eumaeos. Eumaeos undoubtedly approves of the anecdotal tale offered by his bedraggled Cretan guest, and the particular nature of his approval warrants attention:

“Old man, the story [*ainos*] is excellent that you have told.  
 And no profitless word did you speak improperly.  
 So you shall not want for clothes or for anything else,  
 Of the things that befit a long suffering suppliant one meets.” (XIV. 508-511)

Strikingly, Eumaeos’s response to the story does not center upon its realistic evocation of the trickery of his beloved master, which seemingly would have convinced Eumaeos that the Cretan had truthfully encountered Odysseus; rather, Eumaeos’s response ostensibly ignores the specific content of the story altogether and instead directly praises the beggar’s *manner of telling* it—“no profitless word did you speak improperly.” As Louise Pratt claims, “It is not entirely clear whether Eumaeos believes Odysseus’ story. His calling it an *ainos* may indicate his awareness of it as a fiction with a concealed message; this is what the word *ainos* means elsewhere in archaic poetry” (89). In rewarding the Cretan beggar for a story well told—“So you shall not want for clothes or for anything else”—Eumaeos may well also be responding to, and indeed imitating, the particular *likeness* that the tale has presented to his imagination. In marked contrast to the suitor Antinoos, who utterly fails to see in the beggar’s/Odysseus’s tale of a painful reversal of fortune a likeness to his own impending fate (see XVII.419-453), Eumaeos possesses the kind of perspicacious double vision that can apprehend the events of a tale as simultaneously presenting an imitation of an action, a likeness best expressed indirectly. In sum, in Odysseus’s poetic *ainos* and Eumaeos’s response to it, poetry and action merge. Both poetic “acts”—one spoken, one manifested in imitative human action—are in and of themselves pleasurable activities, and are also mediums through which to negotiate the most pressing and practical of concerns.

Odysseus’s lies ultimately reveal that human thought and action, based predominantly on narrative constructions in which sharp demarcations between truth and fiction prove impossible, are inherently poetic in the broad Aristotelian sense of poetry as imitation of action. Poetic imitation does not occur as a secondary embellishment upon an unchanging ground of truth or authenticity; rather, imitation exists all the way down, which is merely another way of saying what innumerable thinkers, from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Ricoeur, have long claimed: all human truths are relational, metaphorical. To engage human truth with eyes open to its



metaphorical layers is to negotiate human thought and action in a poetic mode, a mode of *play* that avoids the high seriousness and the desperate insistence upon *belief* associated with literalistic modes of awareness that would demand that semiotic signs tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Eumaeos's appreciative delight after listening to Odysseus's *ainos*, and his resulting *acting out* of this delight, stem from the inherent joy of a mind becoming aware of its own motions: to recognize a likeness *as a likeness* is to discover that thinking is not so much a serious business as a form of play that by its very nature proceeds by indirections.

Athene's smile is of the same nature as Eumaeos's appreciation of a story well told, but the goddess's reaction takes place essentially on a meta level: she does not so much glimpse a particular likeness *in* Odysseus's story as in the habitual activity itself of inventively fashioning likenesses. Athene, that is, *recognizes* Odysseus, which is to say that she recognizes trickster, whose native land is a groundless ground of shifty deceptions that do not cease even when faced with the divine. Athene's affectionate response suggests that to use language to construct and understand likenesses, especially about the most important things—death, love, human community, relationship with the non-human—is really great fun, something that professional thinkers and scholars often fail to admit. At the same time, to link Athene's sly smile to Eumaeos's ethical kindness is to claim what moralists of all stripes consistently deny: recognizing the playful slipperiness of human truth does not lead to utter moral relativism and depravity. Quite the contrary, as the next section, especially, will show.

### **Narrative Deception is Ethical: Orson Welles's *F for Fake***

From Athene's smile we move to the smile of delight that, in the early moments of Orson Welles's masterpiece *F for Fake*, appears on the face of the little boy whom Welles, as narrator-editor-magician-charlatan, has solicited as a partner/spectator for a bit of old-fashioned sleight-of-hand: transforming a key—not symbolic of anything, Welles insists—into a coin and back again. Taking Welles at his admittedly shifty word as to the anti-symbolism of the key, attentive viewers nevertheless cannot fail to intuit that this overall scene, like the encounter between Odysseus and Athene, is symbolic of the delights of self-consciously entering into the tricky realm where sharp lines between truth and fiction dissolve into fluid traces of that magical semiotic space—both true and false at once—whence human meaning originates. As Catherine Benamou, in a brilliant essay about *F for Fake*, writes:

The “magic” of cinematic realism, like the magical act itself, requires the complicity of the viewer who, if only she or he will suspend her or his disbelief, will share in the pleasure of illusion: like the child in the train station in the opening sequence of *F for Fake*, who from the grin on his face may even have already seen the key trick Welles is about to perform (or at least knows that Welles is about to perform a “trick” with that key) yet takes delight in seeing it done somewhat *as anticipated*. (164)

*F for Fake* overtly invites viewers inside the “pleasure of illusion,” the allure of mystery—an invitation figured formally in the film's frequent forays inside Welles's editing room. Indeed, *F for Fake*—manically splicing together bits and pieces of documentary interviews of various personages and narrated sequences featuring Welles himself with footage of Welles editing all this material together—is a film predominantly about the activity of constructing a film. In this

sense the film's overt content, fakery—treated through a mosaic of interpenetrating angles—mirrors its form: the process of filmmaking itself is revealed as a form of fakery, a tricky improvisation, an inevitable *imitation* of the truth even in the case of a supposedly objective form like a documentary.

Since its initial release in 1973, *F for Fake* has resisted straightforward categorization, poised—or rather tottering—somewhere between documentary, fiction, and biopic. Is a movie that playfully disrupts easy distinctions between fact and fiction itself fact or fiction? Welles himself called it “a new kind of film” (Rosenbaum), and film critics have described it using various “metacritical” terms, most helpfully, perhaps, labeling it an “essay” or “essay film”: “The deliberate blurring of the boundary between actual and staged events is facilitated by Welles’s choice of the essay format, which, as Timothy Corrigan has pointed out, is itself located aesthetically ‘between the categories of public realism and formal expressivity, and so becomes a critical wedge within the very idea of filmic categorization’” (Benamou, 146).

Leaving aside for the moment debates concerning how precisely to come to terms with the film's formal complexity, it can be claimed with certainty that *F for Fake* sets out to tell the tale of the remarkable commingling, on the small Spanish island of Ibiza, of two master fakers: the infamous art forger Elmyr de Hory, and his biographer Clifford Irving. Primarily utilizing documentary footage from a never-completed film about Elmyr by French filmmaker and art dealer Francois Reichenbach—who turned the project over to Welles, and who appears as himself in *F for Fake*—Welles crafts a portrait of Elmyr in Ibiza basking in the social frisson generated by the increased public knowledge of his exploits, and speaking openly about his career as an art forger who gleefully dupes the so-called experts and thereby exposes the fallibility—one might even say the “fakery”—of their expertise as arbiters of artistic authenticity and cultural/monetary value. In painting—and selling to art dealers and museums—fakes masquerading as genuine paintings by Modigliani, Picasso, Matisse, and others, the Hungarian de Hory, a shadowy figure and Holocaust survivor who turned to art forgery, we are led to believe, out of economic necessity, has become “the great faker of the twentieth century... a modern folk hero for the rest of us, who have a bit of larceny in ourselves but simply don't have the courage or the opportunity to express it.” These words, spoken in *F for Fake* by Elmyr's biographer Clifford Irving, a fixture in Elmyr's Ibiza social scene and a frequent interview subject in Reichenbach's footage, are deeply ironic, for present in the editorial interstices of *F for Fake*, if not in most of the actual documentary footage the film employs, is the knowledge that Clifford Irving, shortly after writing Elmyr's biography (entitled *Fake!*), successfully duped the publishing world—for a time—into believing that he was meeting with the reclusive Howard Hughes and writing what would be an official Hughes “autobiography.” In other words, the biographer of a known art forger had turned out to be perhaps the most successful literary con man of the twentieth century. Irving's status as a literary faker allows for a *mise en abyme* of fakery that Welles exploits as the guiding structural principle undergirding the overarching hall of mirrors that is *F for Fake*. At one point undoubtedly feigning (faking) physical and intellectual dizziness, Welles as narrator ponders: “If you can buy the notion that Cliff Irving turned to forgery *before* he turned to Elmyr, then I guess you can keep right on through the looking glass and believe that his book about Elmyr is a pack of lies... that *Fake!* is a fake, and Elmyr himself is a fake faker.”

If the intertwined mutual fakery of Elmyr and Irving serves as the ostensible subject of *F for Fake*, the exponential fakery of Orson Welles looms large both thematically and formally.

Within the film Welles acknowledges and revisits the past trickery of his career, for example telling viewers that he got his start in the theatre in Dublin, Ireland after duping the powers that be at a famous theatre into believing that he was an accomplished Broadway performer. Further, *F for Fake* examines and visually recreates the mass hysteria generated by Welles's infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast (the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the radio). Above and beyond these—and other—overt references to his past work, however, *F for Fake* makes Welles's trickery explicit in its insistent manner of raising the curtain on its own processes of composition. As indicated above, the piquant coincidence that the biographer of a faker is himself a faker is not necessarily present “in” most of the documentary footage used to tell the story of Elmyr and Clifford Irving. In other words, in his own appearances in the film, Irving is not overtly presenting himself as the perpetrator of the Howard Hughes autobiography hoax. And yet *he is*, thanks to the magical trickery of Welles's editing, which can lift the scenes of Irving being interviewed about Elmyr out of their original context and into a new story. An obvious example of this technique is the frequent rapid juxtaposing of segments of separate interviews of Irving and Elmyr respectively to facilitate the illusion that the two master fakers are actually speaking and responding to one another! By these and other means—and really, it must be seen to be believed—Irving is essentially faked by Welles into revealing his fakery, even though all he actually does in the film is talk about Elmyr's fakery! By literally seeing Welles manipulate—cutting, splicing, rewinding—and indeed watch the very cinematic narrative they themselves are in the process of watching, viewers of *F for Fake*, like the little boy at the beginning of the film, and like Athene in the *Odyssey*, become self-aware of the inventive deceptions being perpetrated upon them. In sum, in *F for Fake* the camera and the editing booth—and the portly trickster who controls them—are revealed to be the greatest fakers of all, and the self-reflexive game they play is possible precisely because of the willing, indeed the joyful complicity of the viewer.

Much more could be said about the overdetermined fakery of *F for Fake*. Of note especially is the trickery of Oja Kodar—Welles's real-life mistress, whom the camera delights in cinematically fondling throughout—whose sexy manipulations of both Picasso and viewers of the film further illuminate the dynamics of artistic and cinematic fakery. There is also the complex matter of how Welles both reveals and conceals himself throughout the film, a process not as straightforward as it may at first appear in the context of a film that encourages an awareness of its own trickery. As Jonathan Rosenbaum writes: “In some ways, the self-mocking braggadocio—such as ordering steak au poivre from the same waiter carrying off the remains of a gigantic lobster—becomes a kind of mask, while [Welles's] deepest emotions and intentions are hidden away in his own pockets, just as firmly as our own private investments remain in ours.” Regardless, for our purposes here it is most crucial to point out that, in playing with the topic of fakery, *F for Fake* seeks to investigate the particular allure of deception. What fascinates about hoaxers and forgers, those inventive criminals who, like Hermes in his *Hymn*, sign their works indirectly and thereby shatter the naïve belief in semiotic innocence? To be put on the trail of known fakes—Elmyr, Irving, Welles himself—is to search out the *processes* operative in the construction of narrative deceptions, in other words, of mysteries. Does the joy, the allure of this search purely have to do with awakening to the mind's creative motions and thereby discovering one's poetic moorings within a realm of semiotic trickery? Welles's film in fact suggests that we are fascinated by fakes not only because they prod us to epistemological discoveries that are inherently pleasurable, but also because the epistemological discoveries that

fakers trick us into—waking up to our status as meaning creators and not merely passive recipients of meaning from above—carry with them an ethical dimension that actually helps us to lead our lives. Despite what the Bill Bennetts of the world may believe, there is such a thing as a trickster ethics, and it emerges quite provocatively in *F for Fake*, making this most playful of Welles's films not a solipsistic exercise in *jouissance* but a fundamental affirmation of human nobility.

*F for Fake* fairly obviously celebrates a kind of folk ethics that undermines the official moralities—ultimately bowing down before the altars of commerce—present in capitalism's dominant narratives. Hence Elmyr de Hory and Clifford Irving, in the context of the film, can undeniably be seen as trickster heroes exposing the capitalistic commodification of art that takes place in the “art market” with the active collusion of the so-called experts who serve the function of guarantors of cultural capital. The experts, used (though paid for it) by the institutions that profit from the buying and selling of “art,” are precisely, because of the illusive objectivity by which they judge authenticity, what allow fakers to profit by means of inventive, albeit criminal, forgeries. As Welles says in the film: “We hanky-panky men have always been with you. What is new: the ‘experts.’ Experts are the new oracles: they speak to us with the absolute authority of the computer, and we bow down before them.” And then, slyly: “They are God's own gift to the faker.” Confounding the experts requires not buying into the absolutism of their evaluations, their reliance upon a strict dichotomy between “good” and “bad” or real and fake art. Thus, Clifford Irving speaks in the film as a paradigmatic anti-expert trickster when he claims that “the important distinction to make when you're talking about the genuine quality of a painting is not so much whether it's a real painting or a fake; it's whether it's a good fake or a bad fake.”

Beyond this obvious ethical concern to foreground the frequently manipulative business of art, however, *F for Fake*, particularly through its formal complexity and the resulting active complicity of the viewer, fosters an ethics of what might be termed sophisticated tricksterism. The exponential fakery of the film provokes viewers to be on the lookout for narrative deception everywhere they look, even—and perhaps most especially—where they may least expect it, for example in the discourses of those, such as film directors, who pose as authoritative purveyors of meaning. To be an ethical trickster is to be able to out fake the fakers, a crucial skill when confronted with fakers—media conglomerates, cultural institutions, presidents—who have real, dangerous power at their disposal. *F for Fake*, as one continuous exercise in out faking the fakers, is thus a virtual manifesto of trickster ethics. Crucially, though, the film demonstrates that a sophisticated tricksterism that promotes an inveterate skepticism of all truth claims does not inexorably plunge into nihilism and despair, for at the heart of *F for Fake* is a spirited affirmation of the nobility of the human struggle for meaning and of the transpersonal artistic impulse by which this struggle takes place. The very center of this affirmative dimension of the film is certainly the justly famous Chartres scene, in which Welles eloquently celebrates the redeeming power of art, a power that—as trickster delights in demonstrating again and again—can never be univocally “signed” by any individual human artist and that thus remains fundamentally anonymous. Perhaps, *F for Fake* subtly suggests, the nobility of the artistic impulse is most authentically present in the tricky lies of the fakers rather than in the official truths of the institutions that, for the sake of their profits, deny altogether the trickiness of art. Regardless, in a world without divine consolation, where the one certain fate for every artist and his or her work is eventual oblivion, the enigmatic master trickster Orson Welles affirms above all else the strangely impersonal process, always exceeding our attempts intellectually to define

or materially to commodify it, of artistic creation:

Our works in stone, in paint, in print are spared, some of them for a few decades, or a millennium or two, but everything must fall in war or wear away into the ultimate and universal ash: the triumphs and the frauds, the treasures and the fakes. A fact of life... we're going to die. "Be of good heart," cry the dead artists out of the living past. "Our songs will all be silenced—but what of it? *Go on singing*. Maybe a man's name doesn't matter all that much."

### **Narrative Deception is Erotic: Radley Metzger's *The Lickerish Quartet***

At last we come to Radley Metzger, the great Euro-inflected American director of erotic films who, despite generally being underappreciated, is starting to get his critical due. For a moment, though—and this is not really a digression, for our hermetic steps are only seemingly backwards—let us move from one island realm to another, from Ibiza to a fantasy island where dwell the Phaeacians, whose king says about them: "Feasting is dear to us always, the lyre, and dances, / Changes of clothes and hot baths, and the bed" (*Odyssey* VIII.248-9). These Phaeacians are indeed the perfect ancient analogue to the jet-setting sophisticates, leisurely exploring the lush intellectual and emotional complexities of stylish sensuality, who typically inhabit Metzger's late-Sixties, early-Seventies billowy cinematic terrain. Amongst them, in the Homeric telling, sits Odysseus, trickily maneuvering his way between Calypso's island and the general direction of Penelope, and the Phaeacians treat him to what is most likely the first instance of sophisticated erotica in the Western tradition: the blind singer/poet Demodocos's song about the adulterous affair between Ares and Aphrodite. In addition to being a tale of and about erotic titillation—this aspect of the story is undeniable, as attested to by innumerable moralistic and feminist readings through the years construing it as, respectively, a bit of ancient immorality (or morality by negative example) or a distasteful example of patriarchal prurience—Demodocos's song is also a story about detection, detailing the seamier side of Holmes and Watson, as it were (elementary pornography, my dear Watson). As the story goes, the infallible eye of Helios shines down upon the illicit carnal couplings of the luscious Aphrodite and the martial Ares, and soon Helios informs the cuckolded cripple Hephaistos about his wife's infidelities. Hephaistos retreats to his workshop and devises a subtle bronze trap intended to catch Ares and Aphrodite red handed: "He spread bonds all around the bedposts in a circle / And he spread many out from the rafters up above, / Subtle as a spider web, that no one would ever see" (278-280)—the ancient equivalent of hiding in the closet with a video camera. Pretending to be off on a journey to Lemnos, Hephaistos then leaves his wife alone at home, knowing that inevitably Ares will soon take advantage of his absence. Ares does, and in the middle of the goddess of love (quite literally), soon finds himself trapped with her in Hephaistos's crafty bonds. A triumphant but clearly livid Hephaistos then summons all the gods to come see what the "bitch-faced maiden" (318) and the "destructive Ares" (309) were up to. The gods arrive—minus the goddesses, who stay at home out of shame (further evidence, it is claimed, of the perspective of purely patriarchal desire behind this tale)—and irresistibly burst into laughter in response to the lurid scene. Amidst the hilarity, which only increases Hephaistos's rage, Apollo asks his brother Hermes if he would like to be caught in such strong

bonds and sleep with “golden Aphrodite.” “Far-darting Lord Apollo,” Hermes responds, “I wish that might come about! / Three times as many endless bonds might hold me fast / And all you gods and all the goddesses might look at me, / But I should be sleeping alongside golden Aphrodite” (339-342). When Hermes speaks what many a god was no doubt thinking but would never admit—trickster is known to do this—the gods’ laughter exponentially increases.

The tale goes on, and there is certainly more to it than I have indicated here, but our hermetic digression reveals—especially when the often-ignored narrative frame of Demodocos’s song is kept in mind (Odysseus and his Phaeacian companions sit listening to it, “delighted” [368])—that eroticism and detection, sex and mystery, are often embedded (pun intended), and this will be a major theme in our examination of Metzger’s *The Lickerish Quartet* (1970). Further, Hermes’s wonderful willingness to enter imaginatively into the scene before him is a reminder of the *aesthetic* delights of eroticism (a major formal and thematic component of Metzger’s work). That academic discourse does not often concern itself with these delights is something that Zach Campbell attests to in his review of *The Lickerish Quartet*:

Sexually explicit cinema has existed practically as long as any other form of cinema. Culturally, we’ve done a decent job commending “art” that borrows from “pornography”—consider the work of Catherine Breillat or Bernardo Bertolucci or Pier Paolo Pasolini. But what about pornography that grasps for art? Radley Metzger, director of such erotic milestones as *Therese and Isabelle*, *The Lickerish Quartet*, and *Score*, exemplifies this oversight perfectly.

Ah, the *sui generis* delights of a Radley Metzger film! If *F for Fake* is difficult for critics to locate in any particular genre, Metzger’s entire *oeuvre* stubbornly resists straightforward categorization. A lesbian coming-of-age story that unfolds with a brooding, Proustian charm (*Therese and Isabelle*); preternaturally hip Euro-psych stylings framing an adaptation of a Dumas novel (*Camille 2000*); a meta-exploration of the thrills of viewing artsy erotic films, set in the Balsorano Castle in Italy (*The Lickerish Quartet*); a campy, idyllic, and still progressive fable of sexual awakening (*Score*); the wit and panache of a chic merging of pornography and Pygmalion (*The Opening of Misty Beethoven*)—how precisely locate within any critical fiction of genre these works by a man whom Richard Corliss famously referred to in the early ‘70’s as the Aristocrat of the Erotic? Metzger’s films, filmed with luxurious care (often with the help of master cinematographer Hans Jura and art director Enrico Sabbatini) and scored by the likes of the Italian maestros Piccioni and Cipriani, aim at what has been aptly called an “art-porn hybrid aesthetic” that

mediates between the high culture status of the foreign art film and the rough-hewn, low-cult material of the sexploitation feature. Metzger’s work can be seen in terms of its attempt to dissociate from its sexploitation neighbours through a process of cultural distinction, mapping the move from underground to aboveground along an axis of sexual, and cinephile, taste. Shot in Europe with European actors on lavish and “cultured” locations, Metzger’s cinema... attempted to school its public in the erotic pedagogy of continental life. (Gorfinkel)

Or, as Richard Corliss, essentially saying the same thing sans the academic jargon, writes:

Metzger's movies were classier [than sexploitation fare], more literate, better-made, and blessed with women who looked as if they could communicate desire without carrying disease. Although there was less explicit sex per frame in his films than in those of his competitors, they usually had an erotic atmosphere that made a single raised eyebrow more highly charged than an entire William Mishkin gang bang. (19)

Certainly for those of us raised in an era when erotic cinema connotes unimaginative sleaze, discovering Metzger's films is nothing short of a revelation, a passport to a more "innocent" time when an intelligent exploration of cinematic eros could be embraced with uninhibited aesthetic satisfaction.

"I wasn't hiding," the mysterious blond—and brunette—woman (played by Silvana Venturilli) at the ever-shifting center of *The Lickerish Quartet's* playfully phantasmagoric high modernism tells the man, the husband (Frank Wolff). "Maybe not," he responds, "but I was looking." And later, upon meeting atop the ramparts of the family's castle the man's young-adult (somewhere between 18-25) stepson (Paolo Turco), the woman coyly asks, "Did you come up here because you thought I wouldn't find you, huh?" The boy: "Because I knew you would." As these two fragments of dialogue reveal, *The Lickerish Quartet*, like the other "meta-mysteries" examined here, presents a case of a self-reflexive game of deception, a self-aware dance of epistemological hide-and-seek, in which the delights of mystery are effectively turned inside out and thereby made explicit (here, "explicit" in a double sense). Unlike detectives in or readers of a typical mystery story, the three members of *The Lickerish Quartet's* stylishly cosmopolitan family—a husband and wife and their (or rather her) son—all know what they are looking for—a revelatory encounter with the scintillating *femme fatale* they have stumbled upon at the carnival, who may or may not be the same woman featured in the stag film they had been watching just previously—and yet, for a variety of interpenetrating psychological reasons, they have great difficulty in finding it. In the end, their mutual attempts in effect to merge fantasy and reality—and is not an attempted merge between the fantasy and reality of "whodunit" precisely what propels readers through the pages of a traditional mystery story?—only momentarily succeed, but each family member (and, I cannot resist adding, the member of each family member) is left with a newfound awareness that the forever *incomplete* nature of one's erotic and epistemological conquests—the fleeting moments of feeling that one has deliciously stepped fully into reality—is cause not for despair, but for celebration: to discover that one must forever re-discover what seems most succulently real in life is simply to reawaken to the wonder that one is still, profoundly and mysteriously, *alive*. As the wife (Erika Remerg), late in the film, puts it: "People don't stay the same from one minute to the next. Things change. That's the only thing you can count on." She says this with a sense not of despair, but of wisdom, as if vivaciously aware that the unavoidability of change is the very wellspring of desire, physical and otherwise.

*The Lickerish Quartet*, certainly the only erotic film ever to begin with a Pirandello quote as epigraph, expertly negotiates, through a meta-exploration of the adventure of watching erotic films, the complex intermingling in lived life of what can only be abstractly differentiated as "illusion" and "reality." From the outset of the film, when the three family members watch a grainy, black-and-white movie featuring couplings at once sleazy and enticing, viewers become aware that what each character sees—on and off the screen—is conditioned by psychological "screens" of fantasy that ceaselessly reflect images of the real. As the film—and the film within

the film—progresses, the movie projector, essentially a fourth member of the family, becomes in its increasing unreliability an emblem of the subjective factor at work in the various characters' individualized interpretations of what they are seeing. Eventually, the sexualized body of the mysterious woman from the carnival, which both does and does not seem to be that of the main starlet in the film-within-the-film, becomes the locus in relation to which each character attempts to experience as incontrovertibly real his or her individual fantasy of reality.

If the literally and metaphorically interpenetrating fantasies at play in the film are markedly Freudian—a primal scene (established via at times near-subliminal flashbacks) and its resulting Oedipal drama undergird the psychological libido of the family—their expression is Jungian in its imagistic creativity and visionary flavor: the husband's frequent daydream of a wartime rendezvous between a virile soldier and a vulnerable prostitute, the mother's verbal confabulations of owned and disowned guilt and innocence, and the son's spiritual visions of the incorruptibility (despite the most graphically rendered of travails) of Saint Margaret. The perennially sexy dialectic of innocence and depravity is the pivot upon which the characters' fantasies turn, and differing momentary resolutions of this dialectic structure the respective scenes of sexual fulfillment between the mysterious woman and each member of the family. In a scene that cannot fail to resonate with those of us surrounded by too many books and ideas, the husband and the enigmatic woman etymologically seduce (you must see it to believe it!) one another in the library/study, their passion rising precisely to the extent that it can transcend the tendency toward verbal, intellectual representation that is so overtly present in the locale. After ecstatically “overwhelming” a youthful body that is simultaneously innocent *and* corrupt, the man regains his physical and emotional virility. The son and the mysterious woman couple outside in an Eden-like atmosphere of pastoral innocence and natural beauty that no doubt mirrors the son's belief in the innocence of Saint Margaret, herself a visionary substitute for his mother. Nevertheless, the spirited depravity of the young couple's actions functions to displace a too-sharp dichotomy between innocence and experience, the precise strictly-held dichotomy responsible for both the son's resentment toward his stepfather and his escapist visionary flights. Since the scene overtly frames the sun as lighting the young couple's lovemaking in the same manner as the light of the projector animates the interpretation-riddled movie screen—additionally, the crickets' hum imitates the hum of the projector—it suggests that the son himself glimpses, as if watching himself in a film, the significance of his newfound innocent depravity and depraved innocence. The mother, finally, seduces and is seduced by the woman in a scene of tender, transformative bondage whereby she is simultaneously punished and forgiven for her repressed licentious past. After these scenes of exquisite, albeit ultimately elusive (and perhaps illusive), fulfillment, the mysterious woman disappears, perhaps back onto the movie screen whence she seemed to come—indeed, a movie screen into which everyone in *The Lickerish Quartet* is fated to disappear.

Lest the above analyses seem to construe the erotic scenes in *The Lickerish Quartet* as formulaically transparent in their symbolic resonance, as if the film's eroticism functioned merely as a thinly-veiled exemplum of pop psychology, it must be affirmed that the moments of erotic apotheosis in the film are actually overdetermined with significance in a manner that resists definitive interpretations even as it irresistibly invites them. Nevertheless, there is undeniably an organic unity present in each erotic scene that sets it apart from the others and gives it a particular aesthetic, atmospheric “feel.” Metzger himself, when discussing the use—or lack thereof—of cuts in filming and editing a scene, acknowledges the differing aesthetic



principles operating in different scenes: “[I]n *The Lickerish Quartet*, when the boy and girl are on the grass: we were trying to get a pristine, Garden-of-Eden atmosphere, and a cut would have been jarring. But in the library scene... you have a lot of cuts. It was an older man with a young girl, and the cutting helped suggest the effort and the spirit in the spine of the scene. I try not to work from a chart; the scene itself will tell you what kind of treatment you should give it” (Corliss, 24). Regardless of the particular interpretations they invite, then, Metzger’s stylized erotic scenes—“it is *style itself* that is being eroticized” (Gorfinkel 35)—above all prompt viewers to recognize that *eroticism is inherently aesthetic*, mediated by intertwined mental and imaginative deceptions and recognitions, shot through with interpretive gestures that are in some mysterious sense inseparable from physical passion. In the self-reflexive realm of Pirandellian porn that is *The Lickerish Quartet*, sex is epistemological and epistemology is sexy, for Metzger’s film reveals that if negotiating the riddled interaction of fiction and reality is poetic and ethical, it is also erotic. The deceptions self-consciously enjoyed by a consciousness embracing its inseparability from the truthful fictions of trickster are erotic in as much as they inflame the mind with a desire to transcend its habitual stances and certainties. By in effect figuring such a dynamic of Platonic eros *in the flesh*, Metzger reverses the direction of Platonism as it is usually conceived: physical passion is not sublimated into transcendent fulfillment, but just the reverse. *The Lickerish Quartet* thus demonstrates that actual sex—dirty and complicated as it is, and yet fraught with innocence—is the *embodiment* of a psychic, subjective factor that we take for granted only because sex, like the young bombshell in the film, so completely intermixes fantasy and reality. As Gorfinkel writes:

These works move against the realist ontological function attributed to pornography as the limit of the representable... Metzger’s images arrest the motion towards representational truthfulness of the sexed body in favour of presenting sex as aesthetically mediated or dematerializing. Many examples of this tendency can be seen in the texts, in which the *mise-en-scene* serves to make manifest a psychic function or process of desire, arousal and pleasure. (34)

Such a mode of aesthetic eroticism, inseparable from a self-aware engagement with the delights of deception, is present in the experience of reading even the most typical of mystery yarns: one enjoys the epistemological chase, especially when it moves into tricky nooks and crannies that turn out differently than one expected, and looks forward to the revelatory climax, but one knows all the while that the end of the book will not fully sate desire but only momentarily deflect it from its hunger for another book. Inevitably, further mysteries beckon.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> I shall not engage the "Homer Question," that by-now tired debate about the compositional status of the Homeric poems. Suffice it to say my attribution of the poems to "Homer" is merely a critical convenience so that the *Odyssey* can be discussed as a compositional whole.

<sup>ii</sup> □ Eva Brann translates these lines somewhat more evocatively than Cook: "'Dangerous man, dappily-devising [*poikilometis*: diverse-planning], ever-avid for wiles! You are not about to stop – even though you are on your own soil – your deceitful and thievish tale-telling that is dear to you from the ground up'" (Brann 233).

<sup>iii</sup> As Dennis Slattery writes: "It is as if Odysseus is a marvelously complex metaphor for poetry itself, with all of its ambiguities, uncertainties, intertwined plots, paradoxes and possible meanings" (24).

### **Author Note**

**Brian Nowlin**, Ph.D. (ABD) is currently completing a dissertation on Wallace Stevens at the University of Dallas, where he has worked as an adjunct professor of English and as the director of the writing center. Prior to pursuing graduate work in English, Brian earned a M.A. in counseling psychology (with a Jungian emphasis) from Pacifica Graduate Institute, and worked for several years as a psychotherapist in San Antonio, Texas, where he was born and raised. Despite his immersion in academia, Brian strives to avoid the common concomitant of intellectual rigor mortis, an effort largely dependent upon the influence of his lovely, ever-perspicacious wife, who continually reminds him what Trickster knows so well: the sublime is located not apart in some unearthly elsewhere, but right here in the everyday realm of eating and sleeping, laughing and weeping, discovering and wondering.