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THE STORY OF PSAMMENITUS FROM HERODOTUS TO WALTER BENJAMIN[1]

Abstract: Following a thread in Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', the article gives sustained attention to a comparatively understudied tale in Herodotus' *Histories*, the embarrassment of the Egyptian king Psammenitus by Cambyses at 3.14. I give an in-depth account of the literary quality of the passage, its place in Herodotus' *Histories*, and its sometimes surprising legacy in Aristotle, Erasmus (briefly), Montaigne, and Benjamin himself. Central to the success of Herodotus' story, in my account, is the tension between Herodotus' ambiguous narrative style and Psammenitus' ostensibly straightforward self-explanation.

Keywords: Herodotus, ambiguity, explanation, Aristotle, Montaigne, Walter Benjamin

It is a modern literary commonplace that a writer of narrative should avoid too direct exposition, inviting the reader's imagination to fill gaps. Worst of all to our sensibilities is the explicit moral, the didactic statement of a story's ethical and psychological assertions. Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller' has become something of a classic on this principle of narrative restraint: 'It is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it', he writes of Leskov, before reaching for Herodotus' tale of Psammenitus (3.14) as an illustration of 'the nature of true storytelling'.[2] Benjamin himself retells the story, using it to delineate between information (the stuff of news media and novels) and memorable tales like Herodotus':[3]

> When the Egyptian king Psammenitus had been beaten and captured by the Persian king Cambyses, Cambyses was bent on humbling his prisoner. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son,

[1] Special thanks, for their comments and guidance at various stages of the work, to Tim Rood, Suzanne Marchand, L. J. Samons, Brandon Jones, and the editors and anonymous reviewers at *Histos*.

[2] I use the *Illuminations* text throughout. Here, Benjamin (1999) 89. The essay originally appeared as 'Die Erzähler' (Benjamin (1936)), but I reference the German only in the latter part of the article.

[3] Benjamin (1999) 89–90.

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> who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognised one of his servants, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning.
>
> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.

By metathesis, Psammenitus the character here becomes Psammenitus the story, refusing to surrender or explain itself, concentrating its strength in restraint, and finally releasing meaning at each encounter with the reader. It is Psammenitus' resistance to exposition, the tale's refusal to explain itself—for 'Herodotus offers no explanations'[4]—that commends it for Benjamin and renders it timeless.

Those familiar with Herodotus' story will recognise the active part Benjamin has taken in keeping this very story free from explanation as he reproduced it. For in Herodotus, the tale continues and concludes, to the Storyteller's dismay, with explanation: after Cambyses questions Psammenitus about his confusing behaviour, the Egyptian king explains himself so intelligently as to impress the Persian court and elicit pity from Cambyses, while offering readers an almost proverbial statement on the ethics of mourning.[5] It is only in Benjamin's redaction that 'Herodotus offers no explanations'.[6] Yet, despite his mischaracterisation of Herodotus, there is still something to be said for Benjamin's impulse. In the first part of this paper, I offer my own account of Herodotus' story, an extended close reading which argues that the ambiguity Benjamin presses somewhat heavy-handedly into the tale is very much already at play in Herodotus' version, even with its closural moral—

[4] Benjamin (1999) 90.

[5] The story thus follows a common pattern in Herodotus, summarised by Lang (1984) 50–1 as follows: 1. Persian king acts as expected (i.e., despotically); 2. Person affected reacts unexpectedly; 3. King inquires; 4. Person answers unexpectedly, reversing or otherwise affecting the king's original action. She notes 3.14 as 'the purest example' of this pattern but also notes 3.32.2 on the dog pups and Cambyses' wife; 3.119.3–6 on Intaphernes' wife; 5.12–13 on the Paeonian woman; and 7.27–9 on Pythius entertaining Xerxes. The archetype is Croesus on the pyre and the aftermath (1.86–9). Other instances of various question-and-explanation patterns are given at Lang (1984) 93–6. See also Priestley (2014) 51–61 on the broader Herodotean pattern of marvel followed by explanation; Baragwanath (2008) 60–1 on the Persian kings as inquirers of emotional psychology, cf. Branscome (2013) 18–19.

[6] Benjamin (1999) 90; the omission has been widely noted, e.g., by Bub (2006) 441–2; Vardoulakis (2010) 161–2; Tufano (2020) 270–2. On the central importance of psychological explanation for Herodotus, see 1.1 with Baragwanath (2008) 15; cf. Pelling (2006) 81–6.

indeed partly because of it. To reapply another's formulation, Herodotus 'convert[s] his moral commonplace into a drama, into an enactment rather than a *sententia*'.[7] Thus, while Asheri has called the tale 'eminentemente didattico',[8] the lesson in this case is revealed only gradually, if ever fully, as we pass through the suspense and ambiguities which Herodotus generates at the levels of narrative arrangement, sentence structure, and word choice.[9] Even by tale's end, Psammenitus' self-explanation, his reading of his own story, competes somewhat disruptively with the preceding narrative as Herodotus has presented it. The ambiguous and oblique relation between Psammenitus' attempted explanation and the preceding narrative partly accounts for, and to some extent invites, the subsequent revisions or redactions of that explanation which I turn to in the second part of the paper. For Benjamin is one of several who have taken interest in, and attempted to rewrite, the story's explanatory ending. I consider three earlier explorations of Psammenitus' self-explanation which Benjamin builds on directly or indirectly, first in Aristotle, then Montaigne and, to a lesser extent, Erasmus,[10] each of them offering different explanations for Psammenitus' actions and thereby rendering Herodotus' explanatory conclusion more malleable, more open-ended, augmenting the story's ambiguity until open-endedness—indeed, the total lack of an ending—finally becomes, in Benjamin, the crowning virtue of the story, and of stories in general. From Herodotus' own account and from the subsequent authors' preoccupation with Psammenitus' explanation, we arrive at the counter-principle to Benjamin's: sometimes, a surprising bit of self-explanation, an explicit moral, is precisely what makes a story worth remembering.

[7] Ricks (1960) 290.

[8] Asheri (2000) 228.

[9] On Herodotean ambiguity and polyvalence, see Baragwanath (2008); (2015); Grethlein (2013) 185–223; Branscome (2013) 1–3; Kirkland (2022) 31–2, 186, 200–10; Olivieri (2004) 31, 181. On literary ambiguity more generally, Empson (1966).

[10] The selection of authors is to some extent determined by my focus on Benjamin's striking reaction to the Psammenitus story: he draws on Montaigne, who draws on Erasmus and others who translated directly from Herodotus. On the other hand, the selection is also meant to give a broad coverage from several periods (classical, Renaissance, and modern), hence the inclusion of Aristotle, the only extant instance of an ancient Greek commenting directly on Psammenitus. duBois (2012) considers Aristotle's use of Psammenitus, but I disagree quite strongly with her account; she also makes passing allusion, without citation of names or works, to Montaigne's and Benjamin's responses to the Psammenitus story. See further notes below.

Part I: Psammenitus in Herodotus

We consider first, at some length, Herodotus' own version of the story, which has not, to my knowledge, received such sustained attention anywhere in modern scholarship. Not that it has been neglected, but the story is usually mentioned in passing or summarised quickly as an instance of one of several broader Herodotean interests: dynastic bereavement and overthrow,[11] spectacles,[12] warner figures,[13] and the ambiguities of gesture,[14] for instance. Perhaps the most consistent through line of these various interpretations is the identification of Psammenitus with Croesus (who himself 'happens', ἐτετεύχεε, to appear on the scene, 3.14.11)—one who has suffered a reversal, learned, and now imparts wisdom to others.[15] But these more summary and hurried accounts of Psammenitus make two undesirable impressions: first, that Psammenitus appears too similar to Croesus (Herodotus contrasts the two in several respects), and second, that Psammenitus' self-explanation appears to come too quickly after his actions.[16] In Herodotus, action and explanation are separated by detailed and artful depiction of Cambyses' processions, a minor explanatory digression, and the chance appearance of Psammenitus' friend. The suspense thus generated invites us to form interpretations of Psammenitus' actions before we hear his own, which then must compete with ours.[17] Just what Psammenitus explains will be a central concern in the reading that follows, as I bring previous scholarly observations together with a slow-paced appreciation of the intense care with which Herodotus has crafted this particular narrative.

Such sustained attention to the Psammenitus account is justified in part because it marks the end of Egyptian sovereignty, that ancient kingdom so

[11] Immerwahr (1966) 168 with n. 57; Benardete (1969) 75–6; Gera (1993); Pelling (2006) 85–9; Welser (2009) 369–70; duBois (2012) 34.

[12] Gera (1993) 45 n. 35; note how bereavement and spectacle are also joined in the closely preceding (3.11.2–3), and shocking, tale of the Greek and Carian mercenaries who bring Phanes' children before his eyes (ἐς ὄψιν) to kill them and drink their blood.

[13] Immerwahr (1966) 161 n. 32; Flory (1978) 148–9; Gera (1993) 46–7; Georges (1994) 187; Baragwanath (2015) 30–1.

[14] Lateiner (2009) 112–15.

[15] Among others, see Gera (1993) 46–7 and Pelling (2006) 85–9.

[16] Such hurried summaries as, for instance, duBois (2012) 33–4; Georges (1994) 187; Benardete (1969) 75–6; van der Veen (1996) 31; Flory (1978) 149; Gera (1993) 45–6. Admittedly, in offering a corrective to these summary accounts, the delays of my extended analysis exaggerate in the other direction, making Herodotus' tale unfold more slowly than it really does. The truth is somewhere in the middle.

[17] For the Herodotean tendency to create and invite competing interpretations, see Baragwanath (2008).

wondrous and important to Herodotus' *Histories*. While one might have expected the Egyptian king's defeat to feature as the culminating success of Cambyses' invasion of Egypt, begun back at the beginning of Book 2, as is his custom Herodotus has dedicated much more of the intervening narrative, in fact the entirety of Book 2, to the customs, history, and monuments of the conquered than to the Persian campaign.[18] This extended treatment of pre-conquest Egypt leads us to Psammenitus' defeat with the full weight of Egypt's former glory still impressed on our minds. Of all the 'anciently great' which have 'become insignificant' (*τὰ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα … σμικρὰ γέγονε*, 1.5.4), we see that Egypt was greatest and most ancient, and we feel all the harder its fall. Psammenitus' trial invites us to consider how even the oldest of kingdoms comes to an end,[19] and I argue here that it comes to an end, not unlike other Herodotean 'endings', rather ambiguously,[20] to some extent inviting the re-considerations that follow in the second part of the paper.

Setting the Stage

Let us now proceed by steps through Herodotus' tale. Two introductory details characterise Psammenitus from his first appearance in the text as both inexperienced and doomed to fail against Persia. The scene is the recently besieged and conquered city of Memphis, whose fall we hear of in 3.13, and now Herodotus introduces Cambyses' test (3.14.1):[21]

> Καμβύσης, *κατίσας ἐς τὸ προάστειον ἐπὶ λύμῃ τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Αἰγυπτίων Ψαμμήνιτον, βασιλεύσαντα μῆνας ἕξ, τοῦτον κατίσας σὺν ἄλλοισι Αἰγυπτίοισι διεπειρᾶτο αὐτοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς*.[22]
>
> Cambyses placed Psammenitus, king of the Egyptians—he had reigned six months—in the outskirts of the city to insult him, and placed him there with other Egyptians, and tested his spirit.

[18] See Rood (2007) 121, 125, who counts 174 total OCT pages of Cambyses narrative, 125 of them concerned with Egyptian digressions. On the Herodotean tendency, cf. Munson (1991) 44–5; Payen (1995).

[19] Pelling (2006) 85–9.

[20] On Herodotean open-endedness, see Dewald (1997); Munson (2001) 15 with n. 40, 204–5; Welser (2009) 371 with n. 32.

[21] On Herodotean trials, cf. 1.9, 46 (with Gera (1993) 46–7); 2.2; 3.38; 6.128. Such trials are really Homeric, e.g., *Il.* 2.73; *Od.* 19.215; 23.181.

[22] The text of Herodotus throughout is that of Hude (1927). Translations of ancient sources are my own.

The insulting nature (*ἐπὶ λύμῃ*) of the spectacle is followed almost too casually by Herodotus' formula for the end of a king's reign and, usually, life:[23] *βασιλεύσαντα μῆνας ἕξ*. The formula connects Psammenitus to the many Egyptian and other kings of the preceding narrative,[24] highlighting differences between him and them. Their reign-tallies have tended to coincide with their deaths, often a satisfying transition to their heirs;[25] Psammenitus receives his formulaic tally in the most awkward of situations, after being conquered by a foreign invader and in the process of being humiliated by the same. *βασιλεύσαντα μῆνας ἕξ*. The three words point to a further contrast with his forbears, the very brevity of Psammenitus' rule.[26] The shortest reign noted by Herodotus so far has been that of Psammis: 'And when Psammis had ruled for only six years …' (*Ψάμμιος δὲ ἓξ ἔτεα μοῦνον βασιλεύσαντος*, 2.161.1). The fact that his six years get an 'only' (*μοῦνον*) makes Psammenitus' six months, drily mentioned as he is escorted to the outskirts of the city, look all the more embarrassing. Herodotus' formulaic play gently adds to Cambyses' insult.

Psammenitus' inexperience contrasts not only with former rulers but with Egypt itself, whose antiquity the reader has been wondering at for some time by the start of Book 3. After that review of Egyptian antiquity, the *οὔτε πρότερον* in Herodotus' ominous introduction to the monarch a few paragraphs back is quite astonishing (3.10.3):

> *ἐπὶ Ψαμμηνίτου δὲ τοῦ Ἀμάσιος βασιλεύοντος Αἰγύπτου φάσμα Αἰγυπτίοισι μέγιστον δὴ ἐγένετο· ὕσθησαν γὰρ Θῆβαι αἱ Αἰγύπτιαι, οὔτε πρότερον οὐδαμὰ ὑσθεῖσαι οὔτε ὕστερον τὸ μέχρι ἐμεῦ, ὡς λέγουσι αὐτοὶ Θηβαῖοι.*
>
> And while Psammenitus son of Amasis reigned over Egypt an omen occurred, very great among the Egyptians. For Egyptian Thebes was rained on—where there never had been rain before or since up to my time, as the Thebans themselves say.

That in the long stretch of Egypt's existence this unique Theban rain should fall within Psammenitus' six months cannot be coincidental, nor propitious.[27]

[23] Cf. 1.7.1, 14.4, 86.1, 102.1, with Dewald and Munson (2022).

[24] Egyptian kings: 2.127.1, 127.3, 137.2, 157.1, 159.3, 161.1, 161.2; 3.10.2. The formula is not restricted to Egyptian kings: e.g., 1.16.1, 25.1, 95, 106, 130, 214; 3.66.2.

[25] Notable exceptions include Croesus (1.86.1) and Apries (2.161.2).

[26] Cf. Croesus' tag (1.86.1) with Dewald and Munson (2022); Cambyses' own is also quite long (3.66.2).

[27] In Herodotus, when *φάσμα* refers to an omen (rather than a ghost as at 4.15.3), it is always, as here, a negative portent from the sky: see 4.71.1–2; 7.37.2; 8.37, with Powell (1938) 371. Cf. the similarly unique *τέρας* of the Delian earthquake at Darius' invasion of Greece,

As Herodotus says elsewhere, 'It is common for there to be signs beforehand whenever catastrophes are about to fall on a city or a nation' (*φιλέει δέ κως προσημαίνειν, εὖτ' ἂν μέλλῃ μεγάλα κακὰ ἢ πόλι ἢ ἔθνεϊ ἔσεσθαι*, 6.27.1). Like the sentence passed on the fifth Mermnad generation which hangs over Croesus' reign, we know from Psammenitus' first introduction in the text that he will not prosper. It is with the portent and Psammenitus' inexperience on our minds that Herodotus arranges for Cambyses to arrange his insult.

The Procession of Daughters

First, the daughters (3.14.2–3):

> *στείλας αὐτοῦ τὴν θυγατέρα ἐσθῆτι δουληίῃ ἐξέπεμπε ἐπ' ὕδωρ ἔχουσαν ὑδρήιον, συνέπεμπε δὲ καὶ ἄλλας παρθένους ἀπολέξας ἀνδρῶν τῶν πρώτων, ὁμοίως ἐσταλμένας τῇ τοῦ βασιλέος. ὡς δὲ βοῇ τε καὶ κλαυθμῷ παρήισαν αἱ παρθένοι παρὰ τοὺς πατέρας, οἱ μὲν ἄλλοι πάντες ἀντεβόων τε καὶ ἀντέκλαιον ὁρῶντες τὰ τέκνα κεκακωμένα, ὁ δὲ Ψαμμήνιτος προϊδὼν καὶ μαθὼν ἔκυψε ἐς τὴν γῆν.*
>
> He dressed his [Psammenitus'] daughter in slave clothes, sent her out to fetch water with a bucket, and sent with her other girls chosen from the nobles dressed in the same way. And as the girls passed by their fathers with cries and wailing, all the other fathers answered with cries and wailing, seeing the mistreatment of their children. But Psammenitus saw, understood, and bent toward the earth.

The description of the insult here takes on the form of a procession, emerging almost word by word: Cambyses not only dressing Psammenitus' daughter (*στείλας αὐτοῦ τὴν θυγατέρα*), but dressing her with 'slave clothes (*ἐσθῆτι δουληίῃ*); not only this, but sending her for water (*ἐξέπεμπε ἐπ' ὕδωρ*); not only this, but she herself carried the bucket (*ἔχουσαν ὑδρήιον*). The lexical procession arrives, as it were, at its final insult when two sentences later the daughters of the Egyptian nobility have become simply 'watercarriers' (*ὑδροφόρων*, 3.14.4).

which more explicitly portends evil—*τέρας ἀνθρώποισι τῶν μελλόντων ἔσεσθαι κακῶν ἔφαινε ὁ θεός* ('God shows to mortals a portent of evils on their way', 6.68.1). Cf. Thuc. 2.8.3 and Munson (2015) 48–50.

The watercarriers pass by in a neatly parallel arrangement with their fathers' mourning:

A: the cry and wailing (*βοῇ τε καὶ κλαυθμῷ*)
B: of the daughters (*αἱ παρθένοι*)
C: as they pass their fathers (*παρὰ τοὺς πατέρας*),

is syntactically answered by

A: the cry and wailing 'in response' (*ἀντεβόων τε καὶ ἀντέκλαιον*, stressing the prefix[28])
B: of the fathers who see (*ὁρῶντες*)
C: their daughters (*τὰ τέκνα*).[29]

Stressing the familial relation, Herodotus has the daughters and fathers not only answer each other syntactically, but sonically blend into one another as the *παρ-* of the verb and of the girls 'approaches' and finally melds into the fathers: ***παρ***ήισαν αἱ ***παρ***θένοι ***παρ***ὰ τοὺς ***πατέρ***ας. But the neatness of these familial parallelisms and cohesion, along with the *οἱ μὲν … ὁ δὲ* structure, contrasts 'all the other fathers' with Psammenitus: Psammenitus' daughter's clothing and water-fetching are answered by the other daughters' clothing and water-fetching; then, all the daughters' grief is answered by all their fathers' grief—except Psammenitus, who is left in what one might call syntactic isolation. Our attention is focused on how he will answer circumstances which he has not answered syntactically.

The isolating focus on Psammenitus prepares us for the strangeness of his response. Like the other fathers in this story (*ὁρῶντες*) and in other Herodotean spectacles of dynastic loss, he 'sees' (*προϊδών*).[30] But the prefix also implies more than mere sight. Taken figuratively, *προϊδών* contrasts with the other fathers' simple sight (*ὁρῶντες*), pointing to some insight or foresight beyond literal vision.[31] The immediately following *μαθών*, which finds no corollary in the

[28] Powell (1938) 29–30, '*ἀντιβοῶ*' and '*ἀντικλαίω*'.

[29] Cf. Thuc. 7.71.3 (similarly concerned with verbal and gestural responses to a spectacle), with Rood (2022) and Pelling (2022) 217–19, 224, who relates the Athenians' imitation of the observed battle to contemporary neurology: 'perceptible physiological responses are an intrinsic part of the "viewing" experience' (224). Sall. *Iug.* 60.4 picks up on the effect. See further Huitink (2019).

[30] As noted earlier, sight and spectacle are repeat motiffs where dynasty and offspring are at issue: Gera (1993) 45 n. 35.

[31] The verb *can* be literal in Herodotus: Powell (1938) 320 gives 'foresee … an approaching object' as the meaning of the verb in our passage, as at 7.88.1 and 7.179. But it

other fathers, reinforces this figurative sense. Psammenitus has 'perceived' and 'understood' something they have not, but this something, because of Herodotus' suddenly compressed and isolating syntax, ultimately escapes the perception of the audience too. We do not know what Psammenitus knows;[32] nor do we know, therefore, what exactly he does or why: ἔκυψε ἐς τὴν γῆν. The meaning of the verb is straightforward enough—Psammenitus bent over slightly, hunched, slouched, bowed down. But the implication of the gesture is less clear. In the absence of speech or any explanation of what exactly Psammenitus sees and understands (προϊδὼν καὶ μαθών), Herodotus asks the audience to interpret Psammenitus' mere body language.[33] The story is at its most opaque and here, truly, 'Herodotus offers no explanations'.[34]

On κύπτω in Herodotus and Elsewhere

κύπτω, like a bow today, is no simple gesture with one implication, but rather could convey a range of meanings for fifth-century Greeks, as becomes clear from other uses in extant literature.[35] In Homer, for instance, it describes the supplicatory action of a certain Lycaon when he takes Achilles' knees (λάβε γούνων), after falling down (κύψας, *Il.* 21.68–9).[36] This associates κύπτω with the bow or fall of supplication, submission. Indeed, this is the basic sense of the

more commonly refers to metaphorical sight of, or provision made for, the future, as at 1.186.1, 2.121.α.2, 3.159.3, 5.24.1, 7.140.3, and others.

[32] In other scenes of this type, Herodotus frequently tells us what the person suffering at the hands of the despot sees or understands: e.g., Prexaspes who '*sees* that Cambyses is unwell' (ὁρῶντα ἄνδρα οὐ φρενήρεα, 3.35.4) or Candaules' wife who '*understands* what her husband has done' (μαθοῦσα δὲ τὸ ποιηθὲν ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρός, 1.10.2). The French translation of Saliat (1556), one of Montaigne's sources, feels the lack and supplements: *connoissant a quel fin Cambyse luy envoyoit tel spectacle.*

[33] For an overview of nonverbal communication in Herodotus, see Lateiner (1987). On the ambiguity and difficulty of interpretation in such communication, see specifically 84, 100. On Psammenitus' bow, (2009) 113.

[34] Comparison with Psammenitus' usual comparanda is again instructive: when Croesus on the pyre sighs and starts repeating Solon's name, or when Intaphrenes' wife wails at Darius' gates, we know exactly why; even in a case more similar to Psammenitus, we may not know why Cambyses' wife weeps about the dog pups who defeat the lion cub, but then we also are not tantalised by an unexplained μαθών. Psammenitus' response to this show of Persian despotism may be uniquely opaque.

[35] The simplex κύπτω occurs only once more in Herodotus, for literally bent cow horns (4.183.2). The following analysis therefore looks beyond Herodotus and beyond uses paired with a prepositional phrase. I omit the several uses of the verb in Aesop's fables because of problems of dating.

[36] Most uses in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* describe more straightforward bending or falling motions (*Il.* 4.468; 17.621; *Od.* 11.585), without the additional context of supplication.

word when prefixed with *ὑπο-*, as in Aristophanes (*Vesp.* 555),[37] and in Herodotus himself, who uses *ὑπο-κύπτω* to describe submission to Persia in all three of its instances (1.130.1; 6.25.2, 109.3).[38] Combining the Homeric instance of *κύπτω* with these uses of *ὑπο-κύπτω*, we might interpret Psammenitus' bending toward the earth as submissiveness. Six-month Psammenitus, with Pelusium lost, Memphis lost, the ancient kingdom of Egypt lost, finally losing his own children, makes a sign of submission or supplication to Persia, in contrast to the mournful protests of the other fathers who have not understood the full scale of his defeat. This new reading of Psammenitus' action could also explain a slight oddity in the Psammenitus narrative as compared with others of its kind. The usual pattern is for a subject's reaction to inspire astonished curiosity and inquiry from the observing ruler.[39] Arguably, Psammenitus' silent bow at his daughter's enslavement is strange enough to elicit that curiosity from Cambyses, but the Persian king makes no such inquiry until the Egyptian's very different reaction to his passing friend. Cambyses' delayed inquiry suggests he interprets the gesture in a way that is not at all astonishing to him, Psammenitus' *ἔκυψε ἐς τὴν γῆν* reads as the *proskynesis* anyway owed to Persian rulers.[40]

Aristophanes offers additional applications of *κύπτω*.[41] Agoracritus the sausage-seller asks Demos why he is slouching (*τί κύπτεις*), paralleling the Psammenitus scene's gesture–question–answer pattern,[42] and Demos answers that he is ashamed of his past errors (*αἰσχύνομαί τοι ταῖς πρότερον ἁμαρτίαις*, *Eq.* 1354–5). Psammenitus' slouch, in fifth-century Greece as now, could be taken as an indication of the shame a very new king might feel in losing a very

[37] Cited by Hornblower and Pelling (2017) 119.

[38] See Hornblower and Pelling (2017) 119, 121; Powell (1938) 368. Additional prefixed uses of *κύπτω* in Herodotus, though with less obvious relevance to Psammenitus' gesture, imply defiant freedom (*ἀνακύπτω* at 5.91.2 with Powell (1938) 22; Hornblower (2013) 245–6; Gray (1996) 386); looking into or through something (*διακύπτω* at 3.145.1 with Powell (1938) 87; Asheri (2000) 352 and *ἐγκύπτω* at 7.152.2 with Powell (1938) 96; How and Wells (1912) II.191); and cooperation (*συγκύπτω* at 3.82.4 and 7.145.2 with Powell (1938) 341).

[39] See again Lang (1984) 50–1.

[40] See Hornblower and Pelling (2017) 119 on *ὑποκυψάσας* at 6.25.2. Cf. the explicit proskynesis (*προσκυνήσας*) of Harpagus to Astyages just before the former's bereavement (1.119.1; cf. 7.136). See also *ὑποκύπτω* at Lucian, *Nigr.* 21; *Nav.* 30.

[41] In addition to those discussed subsequently, see *Ran.* 1091, where Dionysus uses the word to describe a runner with some kind of deformity or hunched posture, or *Pax* 34, where the dung beetle is said to eat his food hunched (*κύψας*) like a wrestler over an opponent. The word unsurprisingly has a special affinity for comedy and for comedic contexts, occurring once each in the most explicit of iambographers (Archilochus and Hipponax), but not at all in the rest of extant lyric, nor in Hesiod. For further parallels, see Olson (1998) 73.

[42] Flory (1978).

old kingdom—and its last dynastic heirs.[43] A shameful slouch may be suggested obliquely by Cambyses' inquiry later in the story, when his messenger characterises Psammenitus' immense mourning for his friend as a bestowal of honour (*ἐτίμησας*, 3.14.9), implying the gesture to his children was somehow the opposite, disgraceful or ashamed. Of course, shame is not altogether at odds with submission.

Aristophanes suggests yet a third possibility, this one more familiar to the Psammenitus tradition. When the opening chorus of *Wasps* comes along looking for Philocleon, they ask why he's not already out and about, wondering if something has held him back. But that can't be, for Philocleon was always too wilful, staid, restrained—stoic, we might say—to be affected or controlled by anyone or anything. They recall (*Vesp.* 278–80):

ἀλλ' ὁπότ' ἀντιβολοίη
τις, κάτω κύπτων ἂν οὕτω
'λίθον ἕψεις', ἔλεγεν.

Rather, whenever someone would ask him for something, he would hunch down and say, 'You're better off boiling a stone'.

Though certainly still comic, the context of *κύπτω* here suggests resolve, the immovability of a stone (petrification will come up again).[44] We may thus see in Psammenitus what Gera sees in other Herodotean bereaved fathers: a 'dignified reserve', perhaps 'intended to cheat [Cambyses] of the satisfaction that outward manifestations of grief would afford [him]: the victims do not oblige their powerful tormentors with an open display of pain'.[45]

So Psammenitus could bow in submission, slouch in shame, or buckle down in a show of resolve. Obviously, our understanding of the emotions behind Psammenitus' *ἔκυψε* will have ramifications for the rest of the scene, and especially for his own explanation of his actions at the tale's conclusion. The syntactic focus on *κύπτω* in Psammenitus' initial reaction, as well as the uniqueness of its usage here in Herodotus, has called for this digression on its possible implications. Now we return to the narrative.

[43] Neil (1901) 177; Austin and Olson (2004) 294 offer additional examples across the Greek corpus for *κύπτω* as an expression of shame.

[44] MacDowell (1971) 172 glosses '"putting his head down" in obstinacy and hostility, like a bull', citing *Ran.* 804.

[45] Gera (1993) 43

The Procession of Sons

Cambyses' insult continues with the procession of sons (3.14.4–6), but Psammenitus' repeated gesture does little to clarify the meaning of the first.[46]

> *παρελθουσέων δὲ τῶν ὑδροφόρων, δεύτερά οἱ τὸν παῖδα ἔπεμπε μετ' ἄλλων Αἰγυπτίων δισχιλίων τὴν αὐτὴν ἡλικίην ἐχόντων, τούς τε αὐχένας κάλῳ δεδεμένους καὶ τὰ στόματα ἐγκεχαλινωμένους. ἤγοντο δὲ ποινὴν τείσοντες Μυτιληναίων τοῖσι ἐν Μέμφι ἀπολομένοισι σὺν τῇ νηί· ταῦτα γὰρ ἐδίκασαν οἱ βασιλήιοι δικασταί, ὑπὲρ ἀνδρὸς ἑκάστου δέκα Αἰγυπτίων τῶν πρώτων ἀνταπόλλυσθαι. ὁ δὲ ἰδὼν παρεξιόντας καὶ μαθὼν τὸν παῖδα ἡγεόμενον ἐπὶ θάνατον, τῶν ἄλλων Αἰγυπτίων τῶν περικατημένων αὐτὸν κλαιόντων καὶ δεινὰ ποιεύντων, τὠυτὸ ἐποίησε τὸ καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ θυγατρί.*
>
> And after the watercarriers passed by, next he sent his son with two thousand other Egyptians of the same age, bound at the neck with rope and bridled by the mouth. They were taken in payment for those Mytilenaeans who were killed on their ship in Memphis. Indeed, the royal judges made this sentence, that for each man ten of the Egyptian nobles should be killed. And he saw them go by, and understood that his son was being led to his death, and while the other Egyptians sitting round him wailed and suffered, he did the same thing he'd done with his daughter.

In the procession of daughters, tight parallelism bound the daughters' actions together, and then the daughters' to their fathers' (except Psammenitus); here, Herodotus separates the sons, by a brief digression, from their fathers. This allows him to give a specific cause for the sons' punishment with the same kind of syntactic drama, bit by insulting bit, we observed with the daughters: Cambyses sends out Psammenitus' son with others, necks bound with rope, bits in their mouths, paying the penalty for the Mytilenaeans—that is, the penalty of death.

The aside itself has at least three effects. First, the simultaneous analepsis, to the ambush on the Mytilenaean heralds at 3.13, and prolepsis, to the death

[46] Part of the ambiguity of the gesture comes from Herodotus' omission of when Psammenitus stops bending down in reaction to his daughter and looks up again at the sons before again bending down. Two up-and-down bows would mean something different from two prolonged hunches.

of Psammenitus' son, generates suspense. The procession pauses for explanation of cause and effect.[47] Second, Herodotus uses the analepsis to tie the Egyptian sons to the ambushed heralds more closely than to their own fathers. Where the daughters had wailed and were answered, *ἀντι-*, by their fathers, the sons themselves answer the demise of the heralds (*ἀπολομένοισι*) with their own demise, again with *ἀντι-* (*ἀνταπόλλυσθαι*),[48] so the fathers are left alone, dynastic links broken by wordplay. Finally, the fact that Herodotus gives the aside here, where Cambyses marches Psammenitus' son to his death as payment and where Psammenitus himself will again make a gesture associated with shame for past mistakes, suggests Psammenitus' responsibility for the Mytilenaean attack and therefore for the death of his own son. This suggestion puts an additional twist on the relation of Psammenitus' story to the broader theme of bereaved parents in Herodotus: while his daughter is mistreated by an invading autocrat, he is the cause of his own son's demise, just like Cambyses will be (3.32.4).[49]

Now that the sons pair with the slaughtered heralds, their fathers are left apart in an extended genitive absolute. These still weep (*κλαιόντων*) but no longer in answer (*ἀντι-*) to anyone. Syntactically deprived of their sons, they are 'in agony' (*δεινὰ ποιεύντων*),[50] their only function now being to contrast, again, with Psammenitus' sight and understanding (*ἰδών*, *μαθών*), which they have no part in. Their long genitive absolute separates these initial cognitive actions of Psammenitus from his main action, engineering a further suspense as the audience waits to see what Psammenitus will do this time.

This syntactic suspense replaces a certain cognitive suspense now partially alleviated. In the daughters' procession, we were left wondering what exactly Psammenitus saw and understood (*προϊδών*, *μαθών*) before he hunched over. With the sons' procession, though, we are brought closer to his mind, told both what he saw (*ἰδών*)—the passing boys—and what he understood (*μαθών*)—his son's imminent death. If we thought Psammenitus endowed with profound

[47] This explanation, too, is left out of Benjamin's account. For Herodotus' digressive 'pause', in ethnography specifically, see Rood (2007) 125.

[48] Powell (1938) 29, '*ἀνταπόλλυσθαι*'.

[49] See Gera (1993) 41–2.

[50] A difficult idiom to translate. See Powell (1938) 80, '*δεινός*' III, for various instances and possibilities, though his gloss of our instance as 'make much ado' seems overly bathetic. See *OED* 'ado', where collocations with 'make' all use the sense of 'ado' as 'fuss' or 'business'. I suppose Herodotus could be read as harshly parodying the fathers 'making a fuss' in contrast to Psammenitus' solemn interiority, but it seems better to take *δεινὰ ποιεύντων* here as a sincere reference to their anguish. Cf. the similar construction at Hdt. 2.121.*γ*.2 (*δεινῶς φέρειν*) where another bereaved parent responds to her dead-child-made-spectacle (*ἀνακρεμαμένου τοῦ νέκυος*). I detect little sense of 'fussiness' about the other instances of *δεινὰ ποιέω*: 2.121.*ε*.1, 5.41.2, 7.1.1, with the possible exception of the second.

foresight and understanding because of the earlier and unexplained *προϊδὼν καὶ μαθών*, Herodotus now changes tack: Psammenitus only understands what is right in front of him, and, because of the explanatory digression, right in front of us. His 'understanding' of the connection between the Mytilenaean slaughter and his son's demise strengthens the possibility that, when Psammenitus 'does the same thing he did with his daughter', the implication is one of shame at past mistakes. Still, the ambiguity of *κύπτω* remains. The sons' procession thus repeats the same themes and possibilities as the daughters' without much clarification.

The Old Drinking Friend

What of the final spectacle? We might have expected now a procession of the Egyptians' wives, and perhaps that was Cambyses' plan,[51] but Herodotus varies from the pattern (3.14.7):

> *παρελθόντων δὲ καὶ τούτων συνήνεικε ὥστε τῶν συμποτέων οἱ ἄνδρα ἀπηλικέστερον, ἐκπεπτωκότα ἐκ τῶν ἐόντων ἔχοντά τε οὐδὲν εἰ μὴ ὅσα πτωχὸς καὶ προσαιτέοντα τὴν στρατιήν, παριέναι Ψαμμήνιτόν τε τὸν Ἀμάσιος καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῷ προαστίῳ κατημένους Αἰγυπτίων. ὁ δὲ Ψαμμήνιτος ὡς εἶδε, ἀνακλαύσας μέγα καὶ καλέσας ὀνομαστὶ τὸν ἑταῖρον ἐπλήξατο τὴν κεφαλήν.*
>
> And when they had passed by as well, it happened that one of his elderly drinking friends, now deprived of his possessions, with nothing except what a beggar has, came begging among the army and passed by Psammenitus son of Amasis and the other Egyptians sitting outside the city. And when Psammenitus saw him, he made a great wail and called his friend by name and hit himself in the head.

Where before Cambyses deliberately 'sent out' (*ἐξέπεμπε*, *ἔπεμπε*) the daughters and sons, now the friend by chance 'happened … to pass by' (*συνήνεικε … παριέναι*); where before Psammenitus' reaction contrasted with the other fathers', now they fade and only he is relevant. Psammenitus now literally 'cries upwards greatly' (*ἀνακλαύσας μέγα*), prefix and adverb both contrasting with the earlier downward and modest gesture of *ἔκυψε*.[52] Psammenitus' expression of grief corresponds in part to the other fathers' (with his *ἀνακλαύσας* compare their *ἀντέκλαιον* and *κλαιόντων*), but Psammenitus also outdoes them with his uniquely verbal response (*καλέσας ὀνομαστί*) and

[51] On the speculative possibility, see Gera (1993) 45 n. 36.

[52] Along similar lines, Stanford (1958) 166–7 notes the contrast at Aristophanes *Ran.* 1068, 1091 between *ἀνα-έκυψεν* 'he pops up' and un-prefixed *κύψας*, 'with his head down'.

cephalic self-harm (*ἐπλήξατο τὴν κεφαλήν*).[53] Where Psammenitus seemed more restrained than the other fathers in his reaction to Cambyses' insults, he now becomes less restrained in his grief for his friend. In a final variation from the earlier spectacles, while he still sees his friend (*εἶδε*), he no longer is said to understand, perhaps suggesting a certain thoughtlessness in this latest reaction.

Still held in suspense over the meaning of all this, we could posit different interpretations of Psammenitus' weeping depending on our interpretation of his earlier gesture: if he bowed in submission to Persia, his friend's chance misfortune grants him a non-defiant outlet for grief. If he slouched in quiet shame at his own shortcomings, his friend draws him out of himself, and anger at what is lost swallows shame. If he tucked down in stoic resolve, the nostalgia of friendship finally unleashes his emotions. This ambiguity (and much of the tale's delight) derives from the extended separation we have noted between Psammenitus' initial gesture and his own explanation of it, which, when it does come, jars against the implications of the intervening narrative.

Psammenitus' Interpretation

Herodotus now tells us that guards 'were reporting' (*ἐσήμαινον*) to Cambyses Psammenitus' 'every reaction to each procession' (*τὸ ποιεύμενον πᾶν ἐξ ἐκείνου ἐπ' ἑκάστῃ ἐξόδῳ*, 3.14.8). Apparently uninterested in the earlier bows but now amazed (*θωμάσας*),[54] Cambyses sends a messenger to demand explanation—much as we feel to at this point—for 'why he did not shout or cry out when he saw his daughter mistreated or his son marching to his death, but did honour … an unrelated beggar' (*ὅ τι δὴ τὴν μὲν θυγατέρα ὁρῶν κεκακωμένην καὶ τὸν παῖδα ἐπὶ θάνατον στίχοντα οὔτε ἀνέβωσας οὔτε ἀνέκλαυσας, τὸν δὲ πτωχὸν οὐδέν σοι προσήκοντα … ἐτίμησας*, 3.14.9). Following the Homeric trope of repeating the preceding narrative's wording in a character's direct speech, the messenger's words pick up several from Herodotus' narrative (*ἀνέβωσας*, *ἀνέκλαυσας*, *κεκακωμένην*, and *πτωχόν*); the effect of the trope here connects Cambyses' amazement at Psammenitus' actions to our own, almost as if we were putting the question. Psammenitus responds with a deft rationale (3.14.10):

> *Ὦ παῖ Κύρου, τὰ μὲν οἰκήια ἦν μέζω κακὰ ἢ ὥστε ἀνακλαίειν, τὸ δὲ τοῦ ἑταίρου πένθος ἄξιον ἦν δακρύων, ὃς ἐκ πολλῶν τε καὶ εὐδαιμόνων ἐκπεσὼν ἐς πτωχηίην ἀπῖκται ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ.*

[53] The naming of the friend again recalls Croesus, who named (*ὀνομάσαι*) Solon on the pyre (1.86).

[54] See Baragwanath (2008) 107–10 on Psammenitus' behaviour (and that of other characters, especially kings) as part of Herodotus' *ἔργα θωμαστά*.

> O son of Cyrus, my family's suffering was too great to mourn, whereas my friend's misfortune was worthy of tears. He has fallen from great prosperity into poverty even as he arrives on the threshold of old age.

As it turns out, Psammenitus claims that his bow was one of awful helplessness: faced with that which is too great for expression, all he could do was acquiesce. The court is impressed (*εὖ δοκέειν σφι εἰρῆσθαι*), Croesus and other retainers weep, even Cambyses feels pity and makes a failed attempt to save Psammenitus' son. This, the despot's last humane action before his own precipitous fall from good fortune.[55]

Although Gera suggests that Psammenitus' explanation moves by being the Egyptian's only recognisably humane and intelligible action in the story,[56] I would argue, instead, that several points make it rather unclear and incoherent as an explanation of the king's behaviour as recounted by Herodotus.[57] For instance, the first explanatory phrase (*μέζω … ἢ ὥστε ἀνακλαίειν*) wavers in sense between impossibility (a sorrow so deep it *could not* be expressed), and impropriety (a sorrow so deep it *should not* be expressed). If the first, we may wonder why the other fathers are able to express their sorrow for what must be the same *οἰκήια κακά*; but if the second, the statement slips from the realm of tender, recognisable human feeling where Gera places it into the realm of calculation and behavioural norm. The parallelism with that which is fitting or worthy of tears (*ἄξιον δακρύων*) leads us into the same territory, and suddenly Psammenitus recalls Herodotus' own narratorial persona, rationally considering what is 'too great for expression' (*λόγου μέζω*) and what is 'worthy of report' (*λόγου ἄξιος*).[58] Of course, the association with the historian's intellectual activity only complicates things further, since the preceding narrative has suggested a Psammenitus of inexperience, submission, shame, or perhaps resolve—but not of deliberation over behavioural norms on what is suitable (*ἄξιον*) for mourning (*ἀνακλαίειν/δακρύων*),[59] what too great

[55] Only two sections later (3.16) Cambyses will be desecrating the corpse of Psammenitus' father, Amasis. On Cambyses' madness, see Munson (1991); Immerwahr (1966) 167–9; Georges (1994) 186–95; Lloyd (1988) 56, 61.

[56] Gera (1993) 47.

[57] For similarly conflicting accounts between Herodotus and his characters, and the resulting implications, see Branscome (2013) 150–91 (on Athenians' account of Marathon at 9.27 vs. Herodotus' own at 6.102–17), 192–224 (on Xerxes' reconstruction of Thermopylae at 8.24–5 vs. Herodotus' own at 7.125–77, 198–233).

[58] On *λόγου μέζω*, see 2.35, 148 with Kirkland (2022) 33–4, 199, 204; cf. Dewald and Kitzinger (2015). On *λόγου ἄξιος*, see, e.g., 1.133; 2.111, 138, 155; 4.28; 8.91.

[59] The distinction of van der Veen (1996) 31 between *κλαίω* and *δακρύω* does not hold up: see Lateiner (2009) 113.

for it (*μέζω*).[60] The only textual suggestion of some rational consideration of what is worth mourning and what is not is the 'understanding' (*μαθών*) which Psammenitus has only in the first two spectacles, but loses in the third. The loss of understanding paints his reaction to his friend (who himself appears by chance—*συνήνεικε*) as particularly impulsive,[61] not rationally considered. Psammenitus' explanation of his actions as following behavioural norms thus jars to some extent with Herodotus' own more haphazard presentation of events. Indeed, the contrast, in Herodotus' account, between Cambyses' planned psychological torture, which Psammenitus understands very well (*μαθών*) and knows how to face, and the unexpected torture of the simple twist of fate that sent his old, indigent friend begging into those suburbs at that time might have led us to expect an explanation more along the lines of, *It is easier to show fortitude in the face of pain contrived by an enemy than of pain imposed by chance.* But then, such direct animosity would not have appealed so effectively to the sympathies of Croesus and Cambyses.

Psammenitus' explanation is successful instead through indirection, another way in which it plays with ambiguity. There is a playfulness, indeed, in the way Psammenitus' address to Cambyses, *Ὦ παῖ Κύρου* (in place of the usual, *Ὦ βασιλεῦ*, e.g., of Cambyses at 3.1.4), references Cambyses' own lack of an heir in order to get obliquely at the dynastic bereavement that truly matters, but cannot be spoken, Psammenitus' own.[62] So too the way Psammenitus' explanation directs us away from Egyptian Memphis all the way back to Troy, by ending with a dactylic clausula (*-κται ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ*) that alludes to a specific moment in the *Iliad*.[63] It is Priam, just glancing Achilles flashing on the horizon towards Hector, who pleads with his son not to consign his father to a fate of death and destitution on the very threshold of old age

[60] Psammenitus does seem to put into words here a common enough norm in fifth century Greek thought. For instance, Harpagus, another Herodotean bereaved, shows grief (*κλαίων*) over the ordered killing of the infant Cyrus (1.109.1), but shows none when he learns of the death of his own son (1.119.6–7, with Gera (1993) 42). Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.237, Bacchylides fr. 2, with Asheri (2000) 228–9; Thuc. 7.75.4, with Lateiner (2009) 114–15; Pelling (2022) 232.

[61] Lateiner (2009) 113.

[62] Cf. Croesus' own address to Cambyses as *Ὦ παῖ Κύρου* at 3.34.5, where the Lydian more directly scolds his lord for not producing an heir.

[63] *ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ* is somewhat formulaic in hexameter poetry, occurring three additional times in this exact form (*Il.* 24.487; *Od.* 15.348; Hes. *Op.* 331) and three times in a slightly different form (*Od.* 15.246; 23.212; *Hom. Hymn Aph.* 106). However, the first appearance of the expression (as far as extant literature can tell us) in the Priam episode, the memorable nature of that scene, as well as the thematic resonance between Priam's loss of children and Psammenitus', persuade me, with How and Wells (1912) I.259; Pelling (2006) 88 with n. 35; and Baragwanath (2015) 30, to take this as a specific allusion to Priam. On the question of whether formulae or cliche disrupt allusiveness, see Pelling (2006) 80 with n. 17.

(ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ, see *Il.* 22.59–62). Like the ending of the *Histories* themselves, sovereign Egypt thus ends with a leap across time, space, and culture, and a maxim whose application is by no means straightforward.[64] But again, Priam is really an indirection, and a perfectly apt one, for Psammenitus himself. For Priam does suffer misfortune on the threshold of old age, like Psammenitus' friend, but his specific misfortune is Psammenitus': not indigence, but the spectacle of sons killed and daughters enslaved. Though we are not told, the long reign of his father would make it very likely that Psammenitus, with his friend and with Priam, is also on the threshold of old age. Between the opening references to Cambyses' father and the closing reference to Priam, Psammenitus' explanation seems to say, in a sense, *Son of Cyrus, I wept for all of us* (for my friend and myself, for you, Croesus, Priam).

One gets the impression that none of this very well answers Cambyses' question. Rather, Psammenitus designs an explanation to impress the Persian king through indirection and surprise, a *post facto* and self-preserving justification for what is otherwise inexplicable behaviour (the most recognisably human kind there is). We too are impressed by the cleverness of the answer, but in addition Herodotus, as elsewhere, has designed the story so as to invite us to consider and weigh the differences between competing accounts, especially where, as here, necessity or self-interest might be pushing someone to adjust the facts.[65] Upon further contemplation, Psammenitus' indirections and not-wholly-satisfactory explanation of his actions invite re-evaluation and re-explanation.

Part II: The Afterlife

Four such re-evaluations will take up the rest of the essay: in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Erasmus' *Apophthegmata*, Montaigne's *Essais*, and finally, a return to Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller'. Their various interpretations of Psammenitus' actions support my point, that although Herodotus gives us Psammenitus' own interpretation of those actions, it is hardly definitive, and yet remains essential to the success of the story. Psammenitus' gesture can be variously explained, and the urge to outdo Psammenitus himself in explaining it must account at least partially for the tale's interest to its later readers. So suggests duBois

[64] On the ending of the *Histories*, see Dewald (1997). Psammenitus' explanation is not quite a maxim or proverb in the strict sense, but it comes close. On the relation in Herodotus of proverbs and explanation, see Shapiro (2000), esp. 93–5, 108.

[65] See Baragwanath (2008), esp. 122–59; Branscome (2013) 151–2, 178–86. Shapiro (2000) 98, 107 finds a similar function for competing proverbs in Herodotus, to invite consideration of opposing viewpoints.

(clearly alluding to Aristotle, Montaigne, and Benjamin, though she only cites and discusses Aristotle):

> The story of Psammenitus … excites very different reactions in the work of its various tellers, providing occasions for pity, for the racking and distortion of judgment,[66] for stoic petrification,[67] and for elegiac regret at our growing subjugation to exhaustively explained information. The tale itself is a germinative seed, a kernel of narrative that calls forth a spectrum of emotion over many centuries.[68]

In what follows, I expand upon these passing references from duBois and adjust her characterizations of each retelling.

A common feature of all three writers is their use of Psammenitus in extract form as an exemplum of their particular interests, rather than discussing the story within Herodotus' broader account.[69] Disconnected from the patterns of bereavement we have seen to be so central to the story, Psammenitus and his explanation mean very differently.[70] The later retellers ignore what must be the primary 'moral of the story' in Herodotus: that human frailty is real, that all nations fall, that nothing can protect us from this vulnerability, not even the book-length grandeur of Egyptian antiquity. In extract, this lesson becomes muted, and the story's primary interest becomes how to explain Psammenitus' psychology and actions. In one sense this disconnection from broader Herodotean arcs thus constitutes a narrowing of the story's meanings, yet in another it helps open the story to new possibilities. For Aristotle, the Egyptian king exemplifies human emotional psychology; for Erasmus, self-control in the face of absolute power; for Montaigne, rational explanation of the inexpressible; for Benjamin, on a more abstract level, the true paradigm of the good story. No single, authoritative version of Psammenitus emerges, just more attempts at explanation.

[66] 'Racking and distortion of judgment' refers to duBois' reading of Aristotle, on which more below.

[67] 'Stoic petrification' picks up on Montaigne's citation of Ovid (*Diriguisse malis*), which Montaigne's most widely read translator renders '*petrified* by such misfortunes'. Screech (1991) 8; emphasis mine.

[68] 'Elegiac regret', 'exhaustively explained information', and 'germinative seed' allude to Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', where the Psammenitus tale, like 'seeds' (*Samenkörnern*) which long retain their 'germinative power' (*Keimkraft*), is the ideal alternative to transitory information. See duBois (2012) 41.

[69] The use of Herodotus for historical exempla has a long legacy, stretching back at least to Aristotle and looking forward through Roman oratory and the Renaissance, see Earley (2016) 126–8.

[70] See the analysis of Defaux (1993) 13–14 on the effect of excerpting for Montaigne's version.

Aristotle's Fear

Aristotle's most famous engagement with Herodotus is that passage of the *Poetics* in which he presents him as the paradigmatic historiographer, his interests firmly in the particular, opposed to the universalising tendencies of both poetry and philosophy (*Poet.* 1451b).[71] Elsewhere, it is the Herodotean particulars themselves which Aristotle, as natural scientist, takes interest in to criticise and correct.[72] From such explicit mentions, Aristotle appears on the whole critical of Herodotus,[73] basically following the Thucydidean characterisation of the historian as entertaining but loose with the facts (Thuc. 1.21.1).[74] That Aristotle is generally critical of Herodotus, and critical in particular of his focus on particulars, contrasts with the philosopher's frequent citation of Herodotus, among others, as a storehouse of historical instances which exemplify, of all things, the universal principles that were, in the *Poetics*, not very much the domain of historiography.[75] Into this category fits Aristotle's citation, in Book 2 of the *Rhetoric*, of the Psammenitus story. Consciously or not, Psammenitus means doubly for Aristotle: not only as an exemplum of emotional psychology, but as an exemplum of the attempt to explain that psychology.

Psammenitus and other exempla in Book 2 illustrate the nature of human emotions, so that the orator can more expertly manipulate them.[76] The section

[71] See Priestley (2014) 211–12; I confess I find Aristotle's distinction misguided, but on the complexities of the passage, see Bartky (2002); Kirkland (2022) 2–3.

[72] For instance, the Herodotean report that Indians and Ethiopians had black sperm (Hdt. 3.101, corrected at Arist. *Gen. An.* 736a; *Hist. An.* 523a) or that female fish conceive by swallowing the male's sperm (Hdt. 2.93, corrected at Arist. *Gen. An.* 756b). See Sawlivich (1991) 2–3; Priestley (2014) 68–75; Kirkland (2022) 1–2.

[73] Aristotle even goes further than most, in taking issue with Herodotus' style (*Rh.* 1409a2).

[74] See Momigliano (1958) 3–4; Earley (2016) 120–1; Kirkland (2022) 2.

[75] Such Herodotean exempla occur in the *Rhetoric* at 1376a14, on Hdt. 7.143; 1407a, on Hdt. 1.53, 91; 1417a5, on Hdt. 2.30 (note the question-and-answer format, paralleling the Psammenitus story). At 1393a–b Aristotle discusses historical exempla in the abstract along with other types of proofs.

[76] In duBois' reading (see esp. duBois (2012) 39), Aristotle uses the Psammenitus episode as an illustration of how emotional appeals distort judgment, but in this she is wrongly conflating the very distinct views on emotional appeal which Aristotle presents in his first and second books, with the first cautioning against the orator's reliance on mere emotional appeals to distort the judgment of the judges (*Rh.* 1354a16–31), but the second conceding that, though based in logical proof, oratory must still employ emotional appeals (1377b15–1378a6). The nature of the various emotions and what arouses them is thus the next line of inquiry (1378a21–30), and it is there that the Psammenitus episode features. Whether there is contradiction or cohesion in this shift of focus regarding emotional appeal has been

on pity is introduced clearly as an effort to understand the emotion in general terms: *ποῖα δ' ἐλεεινὰ καὶ τίνας ἐλεοῦσι, καὶ πῶς αὐτοὶ ἔχοντες, λέγωμεν* ('Now let's consider what sorts of things and people are pitied, and how people feel this emotion', 1385b12). The Psammenitus tale is then cited as an illustration of the kinds of people who excite pity in us (*τίνας ἐλεοῦσι*). Old acquantainces (*γνωρίμους*) can be pitied, especially when they resemble us in several characteristics (*κατὰ ἡλικίαν, κατὰ ἤθη, κατὰ ἕξεις, κατὰ αξιώματα, κατὰ γένη*, 1386a25–6). But relatives or children, like those of Psammenitus, would be too close, inciting fear for the self instead of pity: 'Men pity acquaintances, so long as they are not very close in relation, in which case they consider they too might suffer the same', (*ἐλεοῦσι δὲ τούς τε γνωρίμους, ἐὰν μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγὺς ὦσιν οἰκειότητι· περὶ δὲ τούτους ὥσπερ περὶ αὐτοὺς μέλλοντας ἔχουσιν*, 1386a19–20). This leads to Aristotle's own, brief telling of the Psammenitus tale, which illustrates the difference between pity (*τὸ ἐλεεινόν*, directed toward another's suffering) and fear (*τὸ δεινόν*, directed toward one's own) :[77]

> *διὸ καὶ Ἄμασις ἐπὶ μὲν τῷ υἱεῖ ἀγομένῳ ἐπὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν οὐκ ἐδάκρυσεν, ὡς φασίν, ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ φίλῳ προσαιτοῦντι· τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ ἐλεεινόν, ἐκεῖνο δὲ δεινόν· τὸ γὰρ δεινὸν ἕτερον τοῦ ἐλεεινοῦ καὶ ἐκκρουστικὸν τοῦ ἐλέου καὶ πολλάκις τῷ ἐναντίῳ χρήσιμον. οὐ γὰρ ἔτι ἐλεοῦσιν ἐγγὺς αὐτοῖς τοῦ δεινοῦ ὄντος.* (1386a20–5)
>
> For this reason also Amasis [i.e. Psammenitus][78] shed no tear when his son was led to his death, as they say, but did when his friend came begging. For the latter was pitiable, but the former fearful. Fear is different from pity and incompatible with it, and often opposite in use. Men no longer feel pity when fear is upon them.

debated (Cohesion: Grimaldi (1972) 18–21, 43–6; (1980) 7–10; (1988) 4–10; Frede (1996) 264–5; Dow (2015) *passim* but esp. 107–27; and Reeve (2018) liv–lxiii. Contradiction: Cope (1867) 1–6; Cope and Sandys (1877) I.6–26; Kennedy (2007) 29–30), but no one has taken the position of duBois, that there is no shift of focus and that Aristotle's opening polemic on emotional appeals as distortion of judgment still applies to, and is meant to be illustrated by, his discussion of emotions in Book 2. For emotion as distortion of judgment more broadly in Aristotle's thought, see Cope and Sandys (1877) II.103–4; Grimaldi (1988) 144–5; obliquely, Konstan (2006) 211. For a good overview of the scholarly trajectory of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* over the past century, see Natali (1994).

[77] For the close relation of fear and pity in Aristotle's theory, see Nehamas (1994) 269; Nussbaum (1996) 308–9; Konstan (2006) 211–12.

[78] Aristotle mistakenly calls Psammenitus by his father's name, but the story is obviously the same. See Grimaldi (1988) 145; Cope and Sandys (1877) II.103.

Though he has forgotten his name, Aristotle has not quite forgotten Psammenitus' explanatory effort here. In a broad sense, the philosopher is doing the same kind of thing Psammenitus, and behind him, Herodotus himself, does:[79] offer a rational, psychological account for the king's actions. More directly, Aristotle's introductory notion that pity is not felt for someone of close relation (*οἰκειότητι*) recalls Psammenitus' distinction between his familial (*οἰκήια*) suffering and that of his friend.[80] But Aristotle's reasoning for the distinction is quite different. Where the Egyptian king had appealed to behavioural norms which dictated different reactions to domestic and non-domestic suffering, Aristotle argues in the other direction that the different kinds of suffering cause two different emotions.[81]

In his surprising emphasis on fear (is that really what we feel when our loved ones suffer?),[82] Aristotle may have had in mind, and mixed in, another Herodotean *logos* resembling that of Psammenitus, where fear is central: Cambyses' trial of Prexaspes (3.34–5).[83] After Cambyses shoots Prexaspes' son through the heart to prove his own sanity, the autocrat asks Prexaspes whether he has ever seen such accuracy. Herodotus highlights Prexaspes' fear—'fearing for himself' (*περὶ ἑωυτῷ δειμαίνοντα*, 3.35.4)—as he nevertheless responds politely: 'Lord, I should think god himself could not shoot so beautifully', (*δέσποτα, οὐδ' ἂν αὐτὸν ἔγωγε δοκέω τὸν θεὸν οὕτω ἂν καλῶς βαλεῖν*, 3.35.4). Gera interprets Prexaspes' reaction as another example of that 'dignified reserve' of Herodotean bereaved intended 'to cheat [Cambyses] of the satisfaction' of expressive grief,[84] but Herodotus makes clear that Prexaspes' motivation was fear for himself, not spite for Cambyses. Prexaspes' lack of grief is not a defiant and philosophical self-control, then; rather, like Psammenitus', it is an instinctive self-preservation. Both, for Aristotle at least, are motivated by the same fear.

In Aristotle's explanation, Psammenitus did not perceive in his children a suffering greater than could or should be pitied; he perceived suffering so near

[79] The *ὡς φασίν* seems a conspicuously Herodotean gesture.

[80] Cope and Sandys (1877) II.103; the notion of *οἰκήια κακά* comes up outside the Psammenitus story as well, e.g., at Hdt. 6.21, where the Athenians weep at Phrynicus' tragedy on the fall of Miletos, then fine the playwright for reminding them of their domestic troubles (*οἰκήια κακά*).

[81] Grimaldi (1988) 144–5 attempts to reconcile the two accounts by implying that *τὸ δεινόν* itself is what Psammenitus referred to by that which was *μέζω ἢ ὥστε ἀνακλαίειν*. But this is hard to make sense of in Herodotus.

[82] Cf. Pl. *Resp.* 606a, where *τὸ ἐλεεινόν* is felt in response to both others' suffering *and* our own (*οἰκεῖος* again).

[83] For resemblances, see Gera (1993) 42–3. Other, non-Herodotean investigations of pity might have influenced Aristotle as well, e.g., Thuc. 3.67.4, with Konstan (2006) 202–3.

[84] Gera (1993) 43.

to himself that fear excluded pity.[85] His acquaintance, on the other hand, provided the balance, necessary for pity, between distance (because not a relative) and resemblance (because like Psammenitus he was a man fallen from good fortune). So Aristotle gives us yet another interpretation of κύπτω: Psammenitus, on seeing his children suffering, cowers in fear for himself. When he sees his acquaintance—who is both less and more like him—his fear subsides, and he is moved to extravagant pity.

Montaigne's Sadness

By the time of the Renaissance, the use of Herodotus and other classics for exempla of virtue, vice, and other general principles, seen already in Aristotle, had become widespread practice.[86] Erasmus, for instance, repeatedly turns to Herodotean instances of tyranny as an aid to investigating the figure of the tyrant, its attendant social problems, and the proper responses to absolute and abusive power.[87] In this context fits Erasmus' retelling of Psammenitus in *Apophthegmata* 6.395, one of Montaigne's sources,[88] where small changes to Herodotus' wording suggest a Psammenitus exemplary of self-control and moral freedom in the face of tyrannical torment.[89] As academic–historical consciousness developed, there was debate about the applicability and relevance of such exempla in a very different culture and much later era, and the question of Herodotus' own reliability always loomed, but on the whole Herodotus' *Histories* remained, for Montaigne and others, a central cultural work to imitate and reference.[90]

Montaigne's reference to the Psammenitus story, which would become Benjamin's principal source, comes in a very early entry of the *Essais*, possibly

[85] The idea that the two emotions are incompatible lives on in Caes. *BG* 7.26.4: *plerumque in summo periculo timor misericordiam non recipit.*

[86] Earley (2016) 121, 126–8; Olivieri (2004) *passim*, but esp. 151–9, 197–247.

[87] Olivieri (2004) 139, 171–89 discusses the age's—and especially Erasmus'—interest in Herodotus for investigating questions of power and tyranny; see also 233–5 on the use of the Cambyses' *logos* for instances of *fortitudo* in the face of tyranny, though the Psammenitus story goes unmentioned by Olivieri and the texts he examines. Cf. Hall (2020) on the quite different use of Cambyses' madness by Elizabethan playwrights examining selfhood.

[88] Noted by Screech (1991) 7 n. 2.

[89] Erasmus' *Apophthegmata* consists of several books of wisdom tales and sayings extracted from various sources and collected in 1531 for the moral instruction of Prince William of Cleves. Erasmus translates Herodotus' tale quite closely, following Lorenzo Valla's translation of Herodotus in much of the wording, but he adds some not insignificant nudges which emphasise Psammenitus' extraordinary self-control; e.g., after the second procession, Herodotus' Psammenitus simply 'repeated what he'd done' (τὠυτὸ ἐποίησε), but in Erasmus 'he alone was unmoved to tears' (*solus Psammenitus ad lachrymas commotus non est*).

[90] For a more in-depth discussion of the cultural moment, see Earley (2016) 122–9, though he, with Momigliano (1958) 11–12, possibly overstates the influence of Juan Luis Vives'

the first to be written, 'De la Tristesse' (*Essais* 1.2).[91] The essay treats a handful of emotions—grief, love, joy, shame—which, felt in excess, deprive us of the faculty of speech and in some instances are fatal. According to the arguments of Defaux and Garavini, the essay, especially in its originally published version (1580),[92] speaks implicitly to Montaigne's own wordlessness in the face of certain inexpressible emotions, whether it be his grief for his friend Étienne de la Boétie,[93] or his fear for his own death.[94] Though I agree broadly with their readings, especially the interpretation of Defaux, Montaigne's essay takes on a slightly different light when set beside the original account, Aristotle's version, and Benjamin's redaction. In Montaigne, like, to a less explicit extent, in Aristotle,[95] Psammenitus exemplifies doubly, as an illustration of emotional psychology, but also and more significantly as an example of the use of reasoned and reflective talk (*discours*, λόγος), even of that which is in itself nondiscursive and inexpressible. Herodotus' Psammenitus is a model for Montaigne of speaking about what cannot be spoken.

designation of Herodotus as 'Father of Lies'. Cf. the intense respect for Herodotus demonstrated and discussed at length in Olivieri (2004), and see also Foley (2016). Montaigne partly shared in the scepticism around ancient exempla (Earley (2016) 130–1; Defaux (1993) 16; Losse (2013) 12), though again Earley perhaps overstates the extent to which historical veracity limited the ethical value of a given exemplum. Montaigne cites a wide range of exempla from Herodotus, from the believable to the fantastic, mostly without indication that he considers one kind to be more instructive than another. Only in the 'Apology for Raymond Sebond' (*Essais* 2.12) does he seem critical of Herodotus' reliability (see Olivieri (2004) 56–7). Besides the Psammenitus exemplum in *Essais* 1.2 (which I discuss at length below), compare *Essais* 1.7 on Hdt. 2.121; *Essais* 1.36 on Hdt. 3.12; *Essais* 1.44 on Hdt. 4.25; *Essais* 1.48 on Hdt. 1.88; *Essais* 2.8 on Hdt. 4.180; *Essais* 2.12 on Hdt. 3.101, 4.191, and 2.142–3; and finally *Essais* 3.5 on prostitution in Herodotus generally, though he is probably thinking of the Pharoahs' daughters in 2.121, 126.

[91] The *Essais* are written and revised from about 1571 to Montaigne's death in 1592, and this essay with a handful of others has been dated to the earliest period; see Villey (1992) xxi.

[92] For a more detailed treatment of each stage of the essay's development than I can offer here, see Garavini (1991) 201–15; Losse (2013) 9–12. For the 1580 version as such, Coleman (1980); Defaux (1993). The earlier essays tended to have less commentary, sometimes appearing to be impersonal chains of exempla, but see La Charité (1971).

[93] Defaux (1993).

[94] Garavini (1991) 201–15.

[95] I am not insisting that Montaigne knew the Aristotle passage, though I would not rule out the possibility either, given the popularity of the *Rhetoric* in the Renaissance; see MacPhail (2012).

Where Aristotle saw Psammenitus as an illustration of two distinct emotions, fear and pity, in Montaigne's account he is an exemplum of just one, speechless grief:[96]

> Mais le conte dit, que Psammenitus, Roy d'Egypte, ayant esté deffait et pris par Cambisez, Roy de Perse, voyant passer devant luy sa fille prisonniere habillée en servante, qu'on envoyoit puiser de l'eau, tous ses amis pleurans et lamentans autour de luy, se tint coy sans mot dire, les yeux fichez en terre: et voyant encore tantost qu'on menoit son fils à la mort, se maintint en ceste mesme contenance; mais qu'ayant apperçeu un de ses domestiques conduit entre les captifs, il se mit à battre sa teste, et mener un dueil extreme.[97]

> But the story goes that Psammenitus King of Egypt, when he had been defeated and captured by Cambyses King of Persia,[98] after seeing his daughter walk by dressed as a servant and sent to draw water, while all his friends were about him, weeping and lamenting, nevertheless stood silent, not a word, his eyes fixed on the ground. Soon afterwards seeing his son led away to execution, he kept the same countenance. But when he perceived one of his household friends brought in among the captives, he began to beat his head and show grief.

For the most part, Montaigne compresses and streamlines details.[99] This makes his additions stand out all the more, as when he emphasises Psammenitus' wordlessness by adding words to his sources: *se tint coy sans mot dire* appears in none of the several versions he may have consulted.[100] The

[96] On exempla in Montaigne, see Lyons (1989) 118–53; Losse (2013) 6–7, 12, 158; Earley (2016) 130–1; for Montaigne's use of ancient tales across the essays, Losse (2013) 18–36.

[97] The French text is that of Villey (1992). Translations are adapted from Screech (1991).

[98] I have here cut Screech's Erasmian addition to Montaigne's French, that 'Psammenitus … *showed no emotion* as he saw his daughter', etc., which reflects and promotes stoic interpretations of the story.

[99] E.g., placing Psammenitus' friend among the captives with the son, rather than begging among the Egyptian nobles by chance, a detail followed in Benjamin's version quoted above. Simplification of detail is standard in Montaigne's retelling of stories from antiquity, a technique he learned from older and contemporary *conteurs*: Losse (2013) 2–4, 9.

[100] Defaux (1993) 16 and Losse (2013) 9 cite Pierre Saliat's 1556 French translation, which Montaigne owned (see the catalogue in Villey (1992) xli–lxvi), as the main source for the story. Defaux also mentions Lorenzo Valla's 1455 Latin translation (on which, see Olivieri (2004) 60–88; Foley (2016)), republished by Henri Estienne in 1566, which Montaigne may have consulted. But Montaigne also owned Erasmus' *Apophthegmata* of 1531 (again, see the catalogue just cited), and Screech (1991) 7 n. 2 cites it as a source for the Psammenitus tale (*Apophthegmata* 6.395). Although Montaigne is known to have been more comfortable with

addition of words to describe a moment of wordlessness already shows Montaigne alive to a certain relation between the speech of his own essay and that of his exemplum.

In other aspects, Montaigne is markedly careful to maintain the order and style of Herodotus' story,[101] showing that the movements of suspense and ambiguity in the original (and in its Latin translations), are essential to the tale's meaning for Montaigne. This is true even at the level of syntax. For instance, the drama of Cambyses' insult unfolds similarly: *sa fille*, then *prisonniere*, then *habillée en servante*, and finally *envoyoit puiser de l'eau*. Montaigne's long periodic movement, in which the subject (*Psammenitus*) is set off from the main verb (*se tint*) by a series of participial phrases (*ayant esté deffait et pris, voyant, habillée, pleurans et lamentans*) also reproduces something like the effect in Herodotus' Greek of the balanced μέν … δέ clauses, gradually leading to, and focusing our attention on, Psammenitus' gesture, interpreted now as a simple aversion of the gaze.[102] Montaigne also preserves, in a way Aristotle's brief exemplum had not, the ambiguity of gesture, in that he narrates Psammenitus' nod without explanation and thus leaves room for the reader to wonder in, much like Herodotus had.[103]

Perhaps most Herodotean of all aspects in Montaigne's telling is his decision to leave the tale at Psammenitus' agony and wander from the narrative, consciously or not reproducing, or even exaggerating, the same effect of delay between gesture and explanation we noted in Herodotus. In contrast to his streamlining of other aspects of the story,[104] Montaigne here extends it with a digression on the open-endedness of Psammenitus' gestures.[105] One possibility for comparison (*cecy se pourroit apparier*) is that Psammenitus acted like the Cardinal of Lorraine, Charles de Guise, a contemporary of Montaigne, who restrained his grief on the death of his two

Latin than Greek, I would not rule out the possibility that he also consulted Herodotus' original, *contra* Defaux (1993) 16 n. 29, who incorrectly claims that there was no edition to consult until the Estienne edition of 1592. The 1592 was a second edition of Estienne's 1570 printing of Herodotus, published before Montaigne began composition of the essays. Of course, there was also, still earlier, Aldus Manutius' 1502 *editio princeps*. On these early editions of Herodotus, see Earley (2016) 124–5; Hall (2020) 288–9.

[101] Montaigne's usual practice is to rearrange the structure of stories, suiting them to his needs: Losse (2013) 20–1.

[102] The interpretation of ἔκυψε ἐς τὴν γῆν as a lowering of the gaze (*les yeux fichez en terre*) is universal in Montaigne's sources: *humi vultum demisit* (Valla); *demissit oculos* (Erasmus); *baissa la vue en terre* (Saliat).

[103] Both Garavini (1991) 201 and Defaux (1993) 14 emphasise the ambiguity and openness of Montaigne's telling, but wrongly contrast it with Herodotus', as if the Greek's was straightforward.

[104] Losse (2013) 9.

[105] On Montaigne's inclination to open-endedness, see Langer (2005) 1; Losse (2013) 20.

brothers but lost control on the death of one of his infantrymen.[106] Just so, perhaps Psammenitus 'was already brimful of sadness' (*plein et comblé de tristesse*) after seeing his children's suffering, 'so the least extra burden' (*la moindre surcharge*) of seeing his friend 'broke down the barriers of his endurance' (*brisa les barrieres de la patience*). Maybe it was a philosophical hunch of resilience after all.

But Montaigne circles back to a version of Psammenitus' own explanation of events to control what can and cannot be concluded about the story. We '*could* interpret' (*s'en pourroit … juger*) Psammenitus through the contemporary anecdote, he says, 'except that [our account] adds' (*n'estoit qu'elle* [*nostre histoire*] *adjouste*):

> que Cambises s'enquerant à Psammenitus, pourquoy ne s'estant esmeu au malheur de son fils et de sa fille, il portoit si impatiemment celuy d'un de ses amis: C'est, respondit-il, que ce seul dernier desplaisir se peut signifier par larmes, les deux premiers surpassans de bien loin tout moyen de se pouvoir exprimer.
>
> that Cambyses asked Psammenitus why he had remained unmoved by the fate of his son and daughter yet showed such emotion at the death of his friend. 'Only the last of these misfortunes can be expressed by tears', he replied; 'the first two are way beyond any means of expression'.

Montaigne has adjusted Psammenitus' answer even in citing its authority.[107] In Herodotus, Psammenitus had distinguished what suffering (κακά, πένθος) was too great (μέζω) from what was proper (ἄξιον) to mourn, wavering between the impossibility of mourning his children and the impropriety of doing so, though inclining, as I suggested, toward the latter. By contrast, Montaigne's Psammenitus focuses only on the possibility (*se peut*, *moyen*, *pouvoir*) of expressing sorrow (*desplaisir*) as the central explanation for Psammenitus' actions.[108]

Others have noted how this new emphasis in Psammenitus' answer motivates the rest of Montaigne's essay and its exempla—not all of which are

[106] Setting side-by-side ancient legend and contemporary anecdote is characteristic of Montaigne's thought: Losse (2013) 9; Lyons (2016) 221–2. On the implications of this specific reference to the Lorraine family, see Defaux (1993) 5–12.

[107] The change is discussed at some length by Defaux (1993) 16–19. For Montaigne's tendency to adjust while citing, see Langer (2005) 4; O'Brien (2005) 55–6; Losse (2013) 20–1.

[108] Defaux (1993) 17 notes *pouvoir* as a keyword in Montaigne's explanation; he also notes that this picks up on Valla's version, which makes a similar shift from propriety to ability with *possem*: *fili Cyri, domestica mala erant maiora quam ut possem ea deflere* ('Son of Cyrus, my family's losses were so great I was unable to weep them').

'On Sadness' so much as 'On Speechlessness'.[109] But no one has quite gone far enough in recognising the significance of Psammenitus' self-explanation as a model in Montaigne's essay. For one, readers have been too quick to assimilate what appear to me the clearly contrasted explanations of Psammenitus and the Cardinal.[110] The example of the Cardinal, who was 'in truth' (*à la vérité*) brimful of sadness, such that the least extra addition pushed him over the edge of grief, is introduced as a foil for Psammenitus, a momentary possibility (*cecy se pourroit apparier*; *il s'en pourroit … juger*) which is ultimately excluded (*n'estoit qu'elle adjouste …*). Besides the explanations being different in themselves, a further contrast between the two exempla takes on special significance in this essay about self-expression: the Cardinal, who never speaks, has his actions explained by Montaigne; whereas Psammenitus speaks for himself, giving a rational account of that which is in itself inexpressible. It is this indirect way of accounting for the inexpressible, in particular, that Montaigne circles back to in several subsequent exempla. Grief literally petrifies Niobe in Ovid (*diriguisse malis*, *Met.* 6.304),[111] but that petrification itself is used by the poets 'to express'—*pour exprimer*, the same word Psammenitus used in his self-explanation—'that sad, deaf, speechless stupor which seizes us when we are overwhelmed by tragedies beyond our endurance' (*cette morne, muette et sourde stupidité qui nous transit, lors que les accidens nous accablent surpassans nostre portée*).[112] Erotic passion grips Catullus in poem 51 and Petrarch in sonnet 137, but these poems themselves are the sorts of things 'lovers say when they want to express an unbearable passion' (*disent les amoureux, qui veulent representer une passion insupportable*). 'We cannot display our grief or our convictions during the living searing heat of the attack; the soul is then burdened by deep thought and the body is cast down' (*aussi n'est ce pas en la vive et plus cuysante chaleur de l'accés que nous sommes propres à desployer nos plaintes et nos persuasions*: *l'ame est lors aggravée de*

[109] Garavini (1991) 203–6; Defaux (1993) 17. Montaigne's tendency to stray from an essay's titular theme is discussed by the man himself at *Essais* 3.9, but see also Losse (2013) 159.

[110] Garavini (1991) 201–3; Defaux (1993) 9–10; Losse (2013) 10 even claims that Montaigne presents Psammenitus' self-explanation as an explanation for the Cardinal's actions too. On exempla used for variety, difference, or contrast, see Losse (2013) 1, 12; Lyons (1989) 16, 49, 139, 153.

[111] As noted above, the quote from Ovid must be what duBois (2012) 41 had in mind in characterising Montaigne's Psammenitus as a 'stoic petrification', though the phrase is somewhat confusing, and indeed reductive, as a reading of Psammenitus in the essay, conflating as it does the essay's opening reference to the Stoics with the later citation of Ovid, neither of which apply directly to Psammenitus, who, in contrast to the Stoic sage, feels deeply the forbidden emotion and, in contrast to Niobe, is marked for his *de*-petrification, his breakdown in tears at the sight of his friend.

[112] Garavini (1991) 203–4 notes that the *nous* of this and other statements in the essay strengthens the case for identifying Montaigne with the emotions described.

profondes pensées, *et le corps abattu*). These last two details obliquely return us to Psammenitus' own deep thought, μαθών, and cast down body, ἔκυψε ἐς τὴν γῆν, reminding us again of Montaigne's model, who was caught in speechlessness by his grief, but later could explain himself. The negative exemplum is offered by Raïsciac, the German officer who learned of his son's death and, like Psammenitus, 'amid all the public tears he alone stood dry-eyed, saying nothing, his gaze fixed' (*parmi les larmes publicques, luy seul se tint sans espandre ny vois ny pleurs, debout sur ses pieds, ses yeux immobiles*), but unlike Psammenitus, never was pushed to expression, instead dying of pent-up grief.

The consistent return to the Psammenitus model helps clarify one of the major problems Defaux and Garavini face in reading the essay's emotions back onto Montaigne: his explicit denial, in post-1588 versions of the essay, of feeling any such emotions. *Je suis des plus exempts de cette passion* ('I am among those who are most free from this emotion'), Montaigne adds to the beginning, and in closing repeats, *Je suis peu en prise de ces violentes passions* ('I am hardly in the grip of such violent emotions').[113] With *peu en prise* Montaigne returns us in closing to Psammenitus, who was *pris par Cambisez*. The sense of identification with contrast continues in the final words of the essay, Montaigne's final self-explanation: 'By nature my sense of feeling has a hard skin, which I daily toughen and thicken through discourse' (*J'ay l'apprehension naturellement dure; et l'encrouste et espessis tous les jours par discours*). The imagery is of petrification, Niobe again. But now it is a petrification from reasoned talk, *discours* (a word not far in some respects from Herodotus' λόγος[114]), and thus closer to the activity of the poets who use Niobe 'to express', *pour exprimer*, than to the grief of Niobe herself. Psammenitus and the others are thus not used to model intense emotion, so much as the accounts made of intense emotion; the essay we read is not written by Montaigne-in-grief, so much as by Montaigne-reflecting-on-grief, not the Psammenitus of Cambyses' test, stunned in the living, searing heat of the attack, but the Psammenitus of rational self-explanation. So Montaigne's denials of emotion, made naively and falsely according to Defaux and Garavini,[115] are true in one sense: like Erasmus' Psammenitus, whose actions are an assertion of self and freedom in the face of tyranny, Montaigne is free (*peu en prise*) from wordless emotions because he learns from Psammenitus how to talk himself through and around them. Psammenitus and Montaigne do not eliminate grief by explaining it, but they do overcome its first phase of wordless stupor, and they do so through *discours*, λόγος, story.

[113] Garavini (1991) 209; Defaux (1993) 20.

[114] Garavini (1991) 215 suggests taking Montaigne's term in the dual sense of λόγος as both reason and word; she does not mention the more important sense of λόγος for Montaigne's essay: extended account, narrative.

[115] Garavini (1991) 209; Defaux (1993) 20.

Benjamin's Storyteller

For Benjamin, Herodotus was 'the first storyteller of the Greeks'.[116] It doesn't take a classical education to find this claim—which seems to forget, among others, Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles—audacious to the point of ridicule. Yet Benjamin *had* a school-level classical education,[117] so could not have made the claim in ignorance of Herodotus' forebears.[118] Still, the quality of the claim, its imprecision, its threat of blatant inaccuracy, its boldness, tells us much about Benjamin's relation to his classics, which will help guide our return to his use of Herodotus' Psammenitus in 'The Storyteller'. As Arendt put it, 'his erudition was great, but he was no scholar'.[119] He also was no classicist and failed written translation of Greek (the set text was Plato) in his school-leaving examinations.[120] He reaches for Greek culture and literature not with the precision of a German academic, but with the looser grasp of a literary man whose principal interests lie elsewhere, not unlike Montaigne.[121]

It is thus fitting that Benjamin first encounters Herodotus' story not while perusing the original but rather, like Montaigne, in a later retelling, most likely a 1928 article by Jean Palhan in *La nouvelle revue française*, which references 'La Tristesse de Psammenitus', quotes a portion of Montaigne's telling of the story, and speculates about possible explanations for Psammenitus' behaviour.[122] That it is *only* a portion of Montaigne's telling which Paulhan quotes turns out to be essential for Benjamin's reception of the tale. For Paulhan includes from *Mais le conte dit* up to Montaigne's comparison with the Cardinal of Lorraine,

[116] The discussion of Psammenitus and Herodotus, various parts of which will be quoted, appears at Benjamin (1999) 89–90. For a study of Herodotus that engages with Benjamin's essay, see Gould (1989).

[117] Eiland (2014) 21–2; Tufano (2020) 264–5.

[118] Benjamin (1999) 86–8 does trace the origins of storytelling to epic, but the Storyteller proper is someone more pedestrian than an epic or dramatic poet. The archetype is the travelling tradesman or the resident master craftsman (84–5). Whether Benjamin knew of Herodotus' *prose* forebears is somewhat more doubtful, but even classicists hardly know of them, fragmentary as they are.

[119] Benjamin (1999) 3.

[120] Eiland (2014) 29.

[121] For instance, see the disparate exempla drawn from Greek culture in his most famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', at Benjamin (1999) 218, 223, 242. Tufano (2020); Benjamin (2017); (2022) are further discussions of some broad relations between aspects of Benjamin's thought and Greek literature.

[122] Paulhan (1928); Tufano (2020) 271–2 points out the source; Benjamin (1972) IV.1011 himself references the article in earlier notes. Several in Benjamin's circle were apparently interested in the Psammenitus story: for instance see Bub (2006) 445–8 on Ernst Bloch's use of the tale.

but omits Montaigne's subsequent rejection of this explanation and authoritative appeal to the original. Benjamin thus thinks that Montaigne completely ignored Psammenitus' explanation, the *pointe* of the original story: *Er achtet die Pointe für nichts*, he writes of Montaigne in one of his notes ('he has no regard for the *pointe*').[123]

That Benjamin knows about the original *pointe* which Montaigne supposedly disregarded is one of several pieces of evidence that the German critic did consult his Herodotus (if not his Montaigne) sometime after encountering the Paulhan article with Montaigne's telling.[124] Most clear of all is a note on the Psammenitus story which opens with a German translation, most likely Benjamin's own,[125] of the original explanation in Herodotus.[126] Finally, Benjamin also restores in his own retelling some of the introductory context of the story (e.g., Cambyses' desire to set up a triumphal procession to insult Psammenitus) which he could not have gotten either from Montaigne or Paulhan.

Knowing the Herodotean original, why does Benjamin both omit Psammenitus' self-explanation *and* commit the deliberate inaccuracy of insisting that Herodotus himself never included it?[127] *Herodot erklärt nichts*, explains nothing. This may be simply a convenient omission to prove his theses about storytelling, but it is also a trial of those theses by putting them into practice. Thus, Benjamin's assertion, already quoted in my introduction, that 'it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it', hints at his own decision as storyteller of the Psammenitus narrative to keep it free from Psammenitus' psychological self-explanation.[128] A memorable story should draw on tradition and thus achieves a layered quality,[129] so Benjamin

[123] Benjamin (1972) II.1288. On this and the other notes on Psammenitus, see Bub (2006) 443–4; Tufano (2020) 270–1. Titan (2019) collects the several shorter publications by Benjamin which culminated in 'The Storyteller'.

[124] Cf. Bub (2006) 442–3.

[125] See the editor's note in Benjamin (1972) IV.1015.

[126] Benjamin (1972) IV.1011.

[127] Bub (2006) 442–3 argues that the omission simply increases the austerity of Herodotus' storytelling and thereby sharpens Benjamin's point; Tufano (2020) 270–2 argues along Marxist lines that the omission silences the historiography of the 'winners' of history (but how odd to silence the conquered man, Psammenitus, when you want to have silenced Herodotus himself), in the interest of opening space for the impact of the story in the present; Vardoulakis (2010) 161–2 calls the omission 'crucial' but does not say why.

[128] That it is psychological explanation in general which Benjamin censures is clear from Benjamin (1999) 89, 91. This, *contra* Bub (2006) 442 who thinks Benjamin's 'explanation' refers to authorial commentary—never so narrowly defined by Benjamin—and thus would not include Psammenitus' explanation.

[129] 'The perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.' Benjamin (1999) 93; cf. the importance of the tradition for Benjamin in 'The Work of Art' at Benjamin (1999) 220–1.

cites and preserves elements from both Herodotus and Montaigne.[130] Indeed, Benjamin's omission, without his full cognizance perhaps, has a clear place in the tradition of the story we have seen develop. As we saw in the first part of this essay, even in Herodotus Psammenitus' explanation is staged as just one possible, later interpretation of the king's actions, and not a completely satisfactory one. Instead of closely reading Herodotus to make the point, Benjamin follows the arc of the tradition: Aristotle, while producing his own theories, had made only oblique reference to Psammenitus' self-explanation, Montaigne changed what it said, Benjamin omits it.

To omit is not *to forget*, though. His note on Montaigne—*Er achtet die Pointe für nichts*—shows Benjamin's own consciousness of the original *pointe*, even as he goes on to follow Montaigne–Paulhan in omitting it for other possibilities. His catalogue of alternative explanations ('one could also say …') responds to and challenges an original explanation which Benjamin knows of but does not mention. Because he thinks that psychological explanation is bad for a story—just the kind of psychological explanation that Herodotus, Aristotle, and Montaigne give for Psammenitus' action—Benjamin leaves the ending open, with several possibilities offered but none asserted. Benjamin does look for 'counsel'—wisdom, a moral—in stories,[131] but he cuts the explicit moral out of Herodotus'. The wisdom that Benjamin sees here is broader, is the story itself. After all, Benjamin defines 'counsel', perplexingly, as 'less an answer to a question', like that of Psammenitus to Cambyses, 'than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story'.[132] Psammenitus is again an exemplum, but now of the perfect story, and of the perfect invitation to retell the story.

Scholars thus strike me as slightly unfair in characterising Benjamin's essay as an 'elegiac regret' or 'severely elegiac' for the lost art of storytelling.[133] For one, the tone of these epithets unfairly suggests that elegy or regret are necessarily reproachful modes of writing. Even so, Benjamin's essay is not elegy, only. Excising explanation from Herodotus' tale, Benjamin attempts a better telling of the story, stepping optimistically ('it is certainly not an elegiac

[130] Benjamin follows Montaigne's simplification of detail, making the old friend into one of the prisoners (*un de ses domestiques conduit entre les captifs* becomes *einen von seinen Dienern … in den Reihen der Gefangenen*), and preserves Montaigne's new version of Psammenitus' gesture (*se tint coy sans mot dire, les yeux fichez en terre* becomes *stand … wortlos, die Augen auf den Boden geheftet*).

[131] Benjamin (1999) 86, 99.

[132] Benjamin (1999) 86.

[133] duBois (2012) 41; Eiland (2014) 530. Cf. White (2017) who argues that Benjamin's essay does focus on the present.

mood but, rather, one of anticipation', he writes elsewhere[134]) into the role of the supposedly extinct Storyteller he describes, and thereby attempting to invite future retellings of the story, 'the continuation of a story which is just unfolding'. Whether or not he succeeds in improving the story is another matter, which brings us to our conclusion.

Conclusion

Only in Herodotus' telling is there an epilogue to the story. (Another reason Benjamin's redaction of Psammenitus' explanation fits the tradition: the 'ending' in Aristotle, Erasmus, and Montaigne is not the ending at all; they too have redacted the tale's original ending.) Now, Herodotus is quite unfavourable to the deposed king. Spectacle concluded, he is taken into Cambyses' court to live the rest of his life in peace (*τοῦ λοιποῦ διαιτᾶτο ἔχων οὐδὲν βίαιον*, 3.15.1). *If only*, Herodotus continues: 'If only he understood not to meddle, he would've had Egypt again' (*εἰ δὲ καὶ ἠπιστήθη μὴ πολυπραγμονέειν, ἀπέλαβε ἂν Αἴγυπτον*, 3.15.2). Psammenitus' earlier understanding of Cambyses' trial (*μαθών*) is revealed now to have been a mere intellection of the moment; the Egyptian deposed lacks true understanding (*ἠπιστήθη*). Ignorant of the workings of Persian bureaucracy (glossed for us by Herodotus at 3.15.2–3), Psammenitus, no doubt seeking vengeance for his own *οἰκήια κακά*, 'devised evil and received like wages' (*μηχανώμενος κακὰ ὁ Ψαμμήνιτος ἔλαβε τὸν μισθόν*, 3.15.4): he incited the Egyptians to revolt, was caught by Cambyses, and committed suicide. 'That's how he ended' (*οὕτω δὴ οὗτος ἐτελεύτησε*, 3.15.4).

In Herodotus, the final image of Psammenitus is of someone who can speak well in a pinch (*εὖ δοκέειν σφι εἰρῆσθαι*), but never gains from his suffering the true understanding of a Solon or a Croesus. Yet between Herodotus' ill-omened introduction to the Egyptian monarch and this unfavourable assessment of his demise, the obliqueness of the narrative has given rise to several competing associations and versions of Psammenitus, which open into the speculations and explanations of later retellers. He loses Egypt and bows to Persia in submission and shame; he cowers in fear for himself; he averts his gaze, unmoved by the excesses of tyranny; later, he explains himself, gives indirect expression to wordless grief; in another sense, he explains nothing, offers the Persian court an impressive display of wit with only oblique relation to his own actions. These possibilities and more jostle against one another and, 'not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind',[135] we are nevertheless challenged by Herodotus to judge amongst them or to try

[134] 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting', at Benjamin (1999) 59.

[135] Empson (1966) 3.

holding them all at once. Psammenitus' story and its legacy thus make an excellent example of the variety of strategies by which Herodotus' narrative art engages its readers in interpretation.

Arguably, though, to judge from the story's legacy especially, what makes Herodotus' invitation to his readers so successful in this case is not just the ambiguity and opacity of his narrative style, the lack of explanation which Benjamin praised. For Herodotus, of course, offers explanation, indeed several of them. But the master teller arranges the story such that it maintains that open-endedness Montaigne and Benjamin relish in spite of Psammenitus' explanation. Or, rather, because of it. From Aristotle on, the explanatory *sententia* of Psammenitus, the story's attempt to explain itself, becomes both the ending and the central drama of the story. My sense is that if Herodotus had told the story *à la* Benjamin, without the clever jolt of Psammenitus' explanation, that first attempt at interpretation, the tale would have fallen flat, Psammenitus' ἔργα left as mere confusion and nonsense, ἄλογα.

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