What Is Unnoted

Seven Parables the More

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In memory of

Andrew DeShong

The Seven

The End of Prophecy

> Prophecy ended with the destruction of the Temple. . . . The prophets . . . are replaced by sages. Prophecy will become an increasingly scribal phenomenon.
>
> William Schniedewind

When it was determined in the Halls on High that there should be no more prophecy in Israel, the Imparting Angel was, as always, dispatched to the Writing Prophet with the word.

"Set down— "

At these first words from the Angel's lips, the Prophet, all in one motion, snatched up parchment and quill and began to write.

"—thy pen," concluded the Angel.

And *Set down thy pen*, the Prophet faithfully transcribed.

"No, no," said the Angel, "I do not, as hitherto, confer prophecy, but rather—"

But already the words *No, no, I do not, as hitherto, confer . . .* might be glimpsed forming upon the Prophet's page.

The Angel (as cannot be said of them all) at once saw the difficulty and struck the pen out of the Prophet's hand.

"Ah," cried the Writing Prophet—understandably put in mind of Jeremiah strapping on a yoke to convey the subdual of Zion, of Isaiah going about naked to image Judah stripped bare—"an *acted* prophecy!"

And gathering up his scattered materials, he set about to inscribe The Prophecy of the Struck-Away Pen.

The inscribing, however, goes on and on. To the point where the Angel cannot but wonder whether just possibly the Prophet may be appending (as if in fulfillment of *Jeremiah* 23:16 "Each shall speak the vision of his heart") some reflections of his own—a suspicion only strengthened when, now, dropping eye to the prophet's page, he reads:

"Singled out to record the end of all singling out, how should one fail to ask . . . yes, to be sure, *why now?*; but further: *why me?*; and above all: *when next?* For that there must come an hour-at-which, terms-on-which, prophecy might resume, seems no more than—"

But here the writing breaks off.

“As if only now first,” muses the Angel, “grasping oneself to be, after all, at the end of—”

But then, turning his gaze once more upon the Prophet, he finds he has in view one who—yes, has left off, but in a posture of attent, pen poised o’er page, as if any moment now the imparting must resume.

“Ah, surely, a world in which the prophetic stance is thus firmly assumed and stoutly maintained has not risen to a view of itself as at the end of prophecy,” concludes the Angel, and repairs to the Halls on High for further instructions.

Which now having received, he appears one last time before the Writing Prophet, who, need I say, awaits him pen in hand.

The Imparting Angel parts his lips to speak, bides thus for a time with lips parted, speaks nothing, and departs.

The Writing Prophet drops his eye to a page on which his pen has left no mark and there, in the want of words from his hand, he reads the end of prophecy.

Unguarded

A Museum Guard, after many years of watching over the paintings of others, thought he might like to do some painting of his own.

To some, this might bespeak restlessness or dissatisfaction with the work of guarding. But for the Museum Guard himself, it represented a culmination. To add to the store of treasures entrusted to one's care seemed like nothing so much as the ultimate precaution taken on their behalf—the obvious next step, so to speak.

Not so obvious was the medium or genre in which he was to pursue his dream. Had Jespersen, after decades in the Plains Indians gallery, conceived such an aim, one might look for a run of beadwork pouches from his hand. From Yanisawa, longtime guardian of the Italian Primitives, might be expected a corpus of hillscapes in gold leaf.

But our Museum Guard, longest serving of any, had, at one time or another, guarded it all, worked every room in the place, and, it may be, found in each something to shoot for in his own work. From the Impressionists, he learned to lock in forever the unguarded moment. The Hard-Edge Color-Field Abstractionists taught how to seal off areas; the Suprematists, how to stay on top of a situation. Etc.

And, of course, painting was only one possibility. He had, in his day, done service before pebble mosaics, Cycladic figurines, Ming porcelains, each of which, for a moment, seemed like the way to go. Nor were his dealings solely with finished products; time and again he had made one of a willing (if captive) audience whom some docent or conservator showed how the thing was done. From the world's third greatest expert on niello he gleaned how deep to run the paste in the grooves before heating. He took mental notes as a presentday encaustic painter compared the pigment/wax ratio in her own pictures with those on the wall. And, while celadon-glazed stoneware (should one's taste take that turn) might exceed his means, it did not—thanks to a recent lengthy stint in the Korean room—now exceed his ken.

In short, "The art world is all before me," exulted the Museum Guard one morning in the Pacific Islands gallery as he pondered the expressive potential of ancestor-poles, "the only question being"—and even as he thus framed it to himself he could not but reflect that he was now perhaps in his tenth year of doing so—"How ever choose among?" There was scarcely a style or medium that did not in some measure draw his interest. On what grounds was he to prefer Arte Povera to Constructivism, intaglio to aquatint, Proto-geometric to Hispano-Moresque?

The solution, when it came, came in a flash: *I am a guard. I must create something I myself would wish to guard.*

And he appears to have succeeded. For see! Just over there by the door of yon gallery where he has served many a shift, there now hangs (or looms or stands) a work from his hand; and before it stands the Guard himself, guarding it.

Well, and to what school or style shall this work in want of warding be assigned? Do we look upon canvas? collage? drypoint?

I would be happy to enlighten you, if for even a moment the Museum Guard would get out from between his opus and me. As things stand, though . . . impossible to say! *So* closely guarded does the Guard keep his production that I can make nothing of what he guards.

To the point where at least one critic has suggested that there is, in truth, nothing under guard here, that the only "work" on display is the guardian's work of guarding, that it is, in the end, his own behavior that the Guard exhibits—a speculation that, given our friend's longtime involvement with the Museum's Performance Art program, cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The Night Before the Truth

Tonight, as every night this past week, the other boarders at O'Blattery's rooming house have gathered outside the Oblate's firmly shut door to see what they might see.

For, as they are all aware, come Sunday, the Oblate will be exchanging his room at O'Blattery's for the monastic cell where he shall dwell, a cloistered monk, for the rest of his life; and his fellow-boarders are, it is scarce too much to say, consumed by curiosity as to how their monk-to-be will be passing (as 5-REAR put it) "his last days on earth."

That the Oblate must each night be doing something for the last time—taking leave of *something*—seems obvious; the question, each night, is what.

This might seem beyond conjecture, since not once all week has the future monk been glimpsed outside his room. Nonetheless, every night from behind that firmly shut door there has emanated some hint of what may, just then and never after, be in progress behind it.

Monday he watched his last television show, *The Rockford Files,* easily recognizable by its faux-twangy theme ("Somebody's idea of country," sniffed 4G, the Arkansan).

Tuesday he tucked away his last-ever foreign meal, Nasi Goreng with a Roti Canai starter, if we may trust 3L, who busses tables at the local Pan-Asian place.

Wednesday night he got drunk for the last time on "a semi-decent Vouvray," reported 2F, the sous-sommelier of a nearby wine-bar, after sifting through the bottles heaped up next morning in the hall.

And late Thursday one caught the strains of what was likely the Oblate's last-ever atonal music, the Webern String Trio ("shapely but airless," according to music student 2L).

On Friday . . . well, some dispute there might be as to the gender and number of voices doing the moaning ("three at least," declared 6J; "notice I say, *at least*"), but as regards the character of the moans there could be no doubt.

"Since his last, let us hope his best sex ever," ventured 3A.

"Best for last," shot back 3B—a jest that, actually, pointed to a difficulty.

For, of course, everyone expected the best to be saved for last, i.e., sex for Saturday, the eve of the Oblate's departure. But lo! here he had gone and blown sex on Friday, leaving for tonight's last-ever . . . what? The ponies? Vicodin? Nietzsche? But nary a bookie or dealer (1E affirmed) had been sighted around O'Blattery's lately; and the Oblate's copy of *Human All Too Human* remained on the desk of 4J, who had borrowed it last summer to check a reference and never brought it back.

What, then, was left for this last night to be a last instance of? Surely some hint must any moment now be forthcoming; wherefore since twilight his fellow-boarders have been clustered round the Oblate's door to receive it.

But here it was late Saturday night ("early Sunday, actually," noted 4F, pointing to some sun on the stairs) with nothing in evidence, and everyone was getting a little restless.

At length O'Blattery was prevailed upon to try his passkey, and as the door swung open the boarders received the shock of their lives.

All trace of the Oblate's usual clutter—laundry, papers, books—was gone. His room had been swept clean, freshly painted an institutional white, and for all furnishings displayed only a camp bed, a deal dresser and a priedieu. Over the window hung white muslin curtains; on the wall, a plastic crucifix and an electric sconce. Of the Oblate himself there was no sign.

When had he done all this? marveled the boarders. 6A thought she remembered seeing a moving-van out front one morning last week. 4M vaguely recalled recently smelling paint.

But speculation soon turned to the far more interesting question of what it all meant.

—"Isn't it obvious? He's staying on."

—"So, then, no monastery in the offing after all?"

—"What need, when he's fashioned his own bedroom into a proper monk's cell?"

—"A cell of one's own."

—"The cloister *as* the hearth"—this last from 5P, the grad student in Victorian literature, whose learned jibes, including this one, nobody ever got.

"There's just one little problem," put in 4A. "All our 'homebound' monk's worldly gear has vanished--*and so has our homebound monk.*"

This was indeed a difficulty, and for a time no more was said.

Then suddenly O'Blattery, who all this while had not spoken, spoke:

"I know how the Oblate spent his last night before the monastery—and, what is more, I know where he is now."

This produced a sensation.

"He has departed early for his monastic cell, having passed the night before in this no doubt perfect replica of it."

—"But why—?"

"So as *to feel the difference*," rejoined O'Blattery, whose sense of the situation seemed to grow upon him as he spoke. "On all future nights he will be obliged, constrained, to dwell upon this scene. Tonight he has *chosen* to do so. This whole past week we have witnessed the Oblate's last-ever this, last-ever that. Tonight we witness his *last-ever exercise of freedom."*

This made sense to the boarders, who now gave over their vigil and returned to their rooms.

And in fact on every point—why had the Oblate turned his rented room into a faithful copy of his eventual monk's cell and why, having done so, had he spent his last night of freedom in it—O'Blattery had guessed, or divined, right.

There was just one problem.

The Oblate, a subsequent flurry of phone calls revealed, never made it to the monastery, an outcome O'Blattery could scarcely have foreseen, being, as he was, unaware of the following last-minute developments.

On a prior visit to the monastery, the Oblate had snapped a photograph of his cell-to-be to serve as a template for the replica he was even then minded to throw up in his bed-sit at O'Blattery's, and had mounted it in the left panel of a small diptych-style frame whose right panel remained empty. This photo he consulted at every stage in the selection and placement of those furnishings that would one day witness the "last exercise of freedom" he had just performed.

But now, with that "last exercise" behind him and on the verge of departure for the monastery, the Oblate, on an impulse, snapped a second photo, this one of his replica room, shot from the same angle and in the same light as the monastic original, and slipped it into the other, vacant panel of the diptych frame, facing the first.

When the two photographs were thus juxtaposed, difference upon difference (together with the occasional similarity) leapt out at one. The monastery curtains were cambric, those of the replica, muslin. The monastery dresser contained an extra drawer. Where the replica sconce was electric, the sconce on the monastery wall held an actual torch. Etc., etc.

All night long he had contemplated the differences (and similarities) between the two photos, feeling that he had barely scratched the surface.

But now, as Sunday dawned and the clamor of his fellow-boarders outside the door grew louder, the Oblate clapped shut the diptych, stuffed it into his pocket, descended the fire escape and took off down the street—getting, however, no farther than the next boarding-house after O'Blattery's.

There he hired a room and set out the diptych with its facing pictures on the nightstand, as he was henceforth to do on the nightstand of every room he would ever thereafter occupy.

Which, over time, came to a fair number of nightstands.

For from that hour, the Oblate slept in a different hotel room every night of his life, having, it would appear, found his vocation.

An Aficionado of Regrets

The puzzle was why the Collector should have recorded that first one. He had never been moved to chronicle his triumphs. The Bernaldez Codex, only known contemporary account of Columbus' voyages; a Bologna Pentateuch (1482), first printing of any portion of the Bible in it own tongue; an (imperfect) Bay Psalm Book, picked up off a Miss Grosbeck of Brisbane for a song—all these and countless others entered his collection without remark. Of course, it might be urged, the triumphs spoke for themselves: there they stood, proud on his shelf, what need of claim or comment?
It was only now, having been, for the first time in memory, outbid on a major treasure, that he felt the impulse to make a note; and, reaching down a black-speckled dimestore composition book acquired long since for some long since forgotten purpose, he wrote in the title and purchaser of the unobtained splendor, along with the comment: *Came near. Beat out.*

There now ensued an unbroken run of happy acquisitions—an Ulm Terence containing the first known woodcuts of a theatrical performance, Keats's personal copy of Hazlitt on Shakespeare, a fifteenth-century *Vie de Saint André* with miniatures *en grisaille*—over the course of which he never gave the dimestore composition book a thought.

But then one day he suffered a setback, "my first," he mused , "since that at the hands of" . . . had it been Reinhardt or Knoedler? It irked him that he could not retrieve this detail. Recollecting, however, that he had in fact set it down in the composition book, he once more fished up that volume and, having settled the point (it was Knoedler), entered this latest loss (a Bemis-Hogan *Paradise Lost* in the original calf).

Now commenced a season of alternating conquests and letdowns. A presentation copy of Lamb's *Album Verses* found its way into the collection. A 1544 Fugger Eusebius, bound *à la grêcque*, did not. A 1759 Malherbe, confidently attributed to Dêrome le jeune, slipped through his fingers. The Boxheim Psalter, illuminated with eight roundels, fell to his hand. Each happy acquisition joined its fellows on the shelf. The renegades flew off in all directions. An *Adagia* of Erasmus went down in the vest pocket of a dealer on the *Titanic.* An Aretino *Dialogues* was withdrawn from sale upon its owner resolving not, after all, to take the veil. To say nothing of all those treasures that came into one's possession but seemed reluctant to remain there: books stolen, books borrowed and never returned, books left behind on tram or train. . . . Of each such,

he entered the title and details in his composition book, wondering as he did so whether these fugitives must not possess some shared theme or thread but at length concluding: *only that I regret them all!*

Whereupon, snatching up pen, he scrawled on the front cover of the composition book: *My Regrets.*

Occasionally, there occurred a transaction which he knew not whether to deem washout or triumph. In order to fund his purchase of a first edition of Cicero's *De Officiis* (1465), he found he must sell off his copy of the handsomer second printing on vellum (1466). Without hesitation he did so, shelved the new acquisition, and entered the volume he had been obliged to relinquish among his *Regrets.* But now, much to his surprise, he finds himself no less often opening to decamped Cicero 2 in the composition book than reaching down Cicero 1 off the shelf. It seemed one might indeed, as the expression goes, "cherish a regret."

Still, his own next move surprised him. Over a lifetime of collecting, he had gradually acquired 5 of the 6 extant volumes known to have made part of the library of Sir Thomas Browne. Now suddenly, without warning, #6 (*A Resting Place for the Mind*, 1643, in quarter calf) comes on the market. And what do you know, the Collector not only makes no bid on it, he takes the occasion to put ##1-5 up for sale. All six go to different buyers and the Collector notes the details of each surrender in the composition book, "where" (he reflects) "for the first time in centuries Browne's six titles may be glimpsed together at last, among my regrets."

And now a strange prospect beckons. Might it be that other of his books—nay, that *all* his books—might present themselves as only first truly his when thus relinquished and regretted?

He made some cautious experiments—donated a *Philobiblion* of Richard de Bury (Cologne, 1473) to an institute, left Hooker's *Botany of the Antarctic* (1847) out in the rain overnight (having in each case taken care to enter his move in the composition book)—and in each case found he experienced an unmistakable thrill of possession in dispossession.

He now packs off entire categories: out went all the missals and tropers, anything in green boards . . . . And invariably he is rewarded with the sensation of *only first mine when first surrendered*, his eye being already in motion over his emptying shelves in search of the next extrusion from them.

It must not be supposed, as he thus shucked off tome after tome, that he did so without regret. On the contrary, he felt keen regret for each—accompanied by a keen resolve to acquire each such new regret "for my collection," as (quite without irony) he put it.

Thus it was increasingly over a collection of regrets that he came to view himself as presiding. And was it not just here, he asked himself, that, in the inevitably secondhand world of collecting, one might lay claim to have broken fresh ground? "All men amass or accumulate regrets. But *collect* them? Who ere this? Who till I?"

And brandishing the composition book in air: "May not herein be found the tale of history's first-ever aficionado of regrets?"

In certain moods, the Collector was minded to view the composition book as "material" for an eventual memoir. . . .

But no. Of books he was , after all, a collector, not contriver. The one volume he might ever aspire to bring forth—"my quarto of regrets," as he had taken to calling it—he already held in his hand.

Increasingly, it was the sole volume to be glimpsed there; and if, from time to time, he pulled down other tomes off his shelves, it was only in search of further candidates for its pages, that is, for deaccessioning. Until at last he had divested himself, sold off, cast off every book in the place apart from his quarto of regrets—oh, and a first printing of Du Bellay's *Les Regrets* in quarto (Paris, 1558).

Patrocleia

> What name Achilles assumed when he hid
> himself among women . . . is not beyond
> all conjecture.
>
> SirThomas Browne

It was the last thing Achilles could ever have imagined forgetting.

The names of a Myrmidon or two, of some 6-8 of his fifty Nereid aunts . . . these might conceivably have slipped his mind—although in fact he retained them all, a memory for names figuring for him among the essential attributes of the heroic; for what, after all, is a hero but one who strives after a remembered name?

He could easily enough retrieve the names of the other girls at Scyros, where, seeking to avert the early death predicted for him at Troy, his mother Thetis had stashed him among the king's daughters, disguised as one girl the more: Aglaia, who had promised Thetis to hide her boy well; Eione, who had taught him to hitch a peplum plausibly; Themisto, who had flirted so distractingly with Ulysses bent on flushing him out . . . . (Of course, it helped that he had slept with all but two or three of these.)

No, it was only the girl's name by which he himself had—for years!—dwelt among them that he realized one evening, pouring the nightly libation at Patroclus' tomb, he could no longer produce.

This was strange, considering all the effort he had put into selecting it. For, he recalled with some bitterness, his girl's name had been the sole aspect of his Scyrian sojourn that had been left up to him. Indeed, it was pretty much the sole aspect of his identity that had ever been left to him.

For, of course, if you are a hero, the greater part of your nature is already given in your being that particular one. So for Achilles the dilemma of *long inglorious* vs *brief far-famed*, the duel with Hector, the death by heel—all this, and so much else, came with being Achilles in the first place. To the point where his thinking up a female identity was pretty much the only thinking about identity Achilles would ever do; and consequently he gave it his all. *Anna, Etta, Ina, Fran*—without effort he could summon up all the women's names he had weighed and rejected—*Lana, Lena, Lotte, Lou*—together,

often as not, with his reasons for rejecting them: some for cause (clearly, one didn't want to set anyone's thoughts running on Troy, so out went *Halone, Ecba, Cassie*, etc.); some merely because (*Mona, Mena, Meta, Fay*) one didn't like the ring.

But none of all this brought the missing name any closer. Was there, perhaps, someone he might ask? To his mother Thetis he had never confided it, vexed as he was with her for parking him in a harem in the first place. As for the other Scyros girls, they had long since been dispatched in marriage or concubinage to every corner of the Greek world. And when one day by chance one of them, Peitho, dragged into the field by her current boyfriend, turned up at Troy, she could shed scant light: "All I can tell you is, among ourselves we only ever referred to you as 'Akkee'."

For a time, Ulysses seemed a promising avenue: having actually met with him on Scyros (if only to tempt him off of it), surely he must recall . . . ? But Ulysses could not furnish the missing name. ("I was, I'm afraid, too busy planting sidearms among trinkets to pay heed.")

What Ulysses, being Ulysses, could furnish was a reflection: "Surely to have forgotten your woman's name is your way of 'forgetting' your whole shameful time as a woman." But in truth, Achilles had rather enjoyed his vacation-in-otherness, the one vacation he had ever had ("or am likely to have," he mused, pouring that evening's libation at Patroclus' tomb).

This left only that walking storehouse of Greek memory, the bard Demodocus. For decades Demodocus had been accumulating materials for his eventual epic on events leading up to the Trojan War, *The Backgroundiad*. So now when Achilles set forth his dilemma, the poet was ready to supply—"or rather," he corrected himself, "tradition itself readily supplies"—no less than three women's names traditionally assigned to Achilles on Scyros: "Pyrrha. Kerkysera. Yssé."

"No," sighed the hero, "I was none of those."

"Well, then," ventured the singer, "if tradition has forgot the name of Achilles on Scyros, it appears the tradition goes back to Achilles himself."

The hero was now reduced to haunting the docks, asking of each new slave girl fresh off the boat what might be her name: *Dina, Donna, Dora, Min . . .* ? Thus queried, each girl's heart leapt: *Achilles, Achilles desires me!*

But, of course, all Achilles desired was to hear back his own lost name, have back his own lost self: *Augé, Arché, Anthé, Liz . . . .* Surely it was only a matter of time—

But the time never came.

It is only now, at the moment of death, as the arrow enters his heel, that Achilles hears himself speak:

Alas! All is up with—

not so much retrieving or recalling but simply finding upon his lips the lost name:

Alas! All is up with little Patrocleia!

Second Troy

On the point of his next whittling project, Epeios, fashioner of the Trojan Horse, had for some while now been at a loss.

"Not that I lack for offers," he hastened to assure. "Why, scarce a week goes by but what the gallery sends along some proposal for—well, rarely anything so flat-out as a redo of Dobbin, but the equine tie-in is never far to seek: 'Come, Master, dash me off a Hector, Tamer of *guesswhats*, or the *youknowwhos* of the Sun, or the man-eating *blankblanks* of Diomed.' Then, of course, there are your subtler patrons, whose lips the word *horse* never graces but who wouldn't say neigh to . . . oh, a fetlock-shaped garden ornament or a nightstand in the form of a pastern. And not long since, the people at Gagosian-Troad tell me, they were approached by a Ligurian collector bent on acquiring *the-tools-by-which-was-fashioned* for an installation.

"On such, and all such, I turn my back. Don't these people understand that what one dreads above all is to repeat oneself?

"Not, I hasten to add," he concluded, his face darkening, "that one is, as yet, exactly awash in fresh tacks and new directions."

So stymied did Epeios appear on this occasion that I was startled, on next popping round, to see great heaps of oak and ash spread out before him, his tools not packed off to Liguria but ready to hand, and himself hard at work.

"Look here," he cried, gesturing toward some half-worked balsa blocks, "the Skaian and Dardanian Gates; there behold the bedchambers of Priam's daughters; and just past them—"

"Stay," I broke in, "am I to understand that for your next project, but now unglimpsed, you are now resolved—?"

"To throw up," quoth Epeios, "what who but I have thrown down—even so! Wherefore you gaze upon this 200: 1 replica, rendered in slats and boards, of Troy-in-the-Day: courtyards and colonnades, cisterns and granaries, theatres and baths—I supply it all!

"But further: having robbed them of all future, I here confer such past as, absent my efforts, none might ever . . . . For, look you, there are many Troys—stratum upon stratum, town atop town—little guessed at by its latest inhabitants, but which we Greeks, aiming to undermine, have explored in depth. In this Troy of mine, all these find place.

"So, for example, just below yesteryear's still-smoldering streets, I lay down Bronze Age Troy (Stratum VII); under it, Stone Age Ilion (Stratum VI); and beneath that,

the late-Helladic city of Stratum Va. And to each tier, I affix tiny replicas of artifacts associated with that era—for example, tripods thought to have been acquired in trade with Argos during Troy IV on Stratum IV; ivory plaques suggestive of Hittite contacts during Troy II on Stratum II. And, where scholars differ as to which era such-and such an antique doodad hails from—say, these repoussé gold discs as likely Troy V as III—I implant a tiny gold disc on Stratum V and another on Stratum III.

"Best of all, in my model the Cast-Forth may glimpse—what else none might ever glimpse—Troy in Times to Come: Hellenistic Troy, Roman Troy, Byzantine Troy, and, of course, the eventual Turkish backwater. Thus from the very hand that whittled down their future they shall receive all Troy ever was and shall never be."

As we spoke, Epeios continued to work; and when I left, he was just tweezing into Stratum III a tiny brass loom-weight of Cretan design.

I did not see Epeios again till the day of his opening, or rather, the evening of that day. For I arrived late on the scene; Gagosian-Troad was already shuttered for the night; and the single bare bulb that lit the gallery afforded no glimpse of whittler or whittled town. All that met the eye, anywhere one turned, was heaps and mounds of woodchips and shavings—an entire landscape of splinters. What had gone down here? Where was the fashioner of the Horse, where his second Troy?

After a moment, one of the scrapheaps shifted, and out from beneath, covered, like a mourner, in (saw)dust, rose Epeios.

What in the world—?

"They tore it apart!"

" 'They'? "

"My discerning public."

"Ah, so, then, your reconstructed Troy met with scant—? Or perhaps, the very notion of reconstructing Troy struck not a few—?"

"They were looking for the soldiers!"

"Pardon?"

"Word having got round of new work by the Framer of the Trojan Horse, all anyone cared to know was: *Where had I hidden the Greeks* THIS *time?"*

Epeios flung a handful of (saw)dust into the air.

"Once more I have been the ruin of Troy. I can, it seems, only repeat myself."

What Is Or?

It was Ulysses' last morning in Ithaca

Long ago, seer Tiresias had prophesied that the wanderer, once home from Troy, should not long abide there, but one day, avid for other skies, should set forth anew, this time pushing on till he came to a place so far inland that none there could tell an oar from a winnowing-fan.

That day, it seems, has dawned. For lo! here is Ulysses—leave taken, gear stowed—on the dock, ready to hoist sail for parts unknown.

But what is this? Between the ship and himself, blocking his path, stands Penelope, attended by their house-slave Oder, who staggers beneath the weight of a vast roll of hangings or weavings wound round . . . well, some sort of rod or spindle, one cannot say for sure.

"I thought we had taken our farewells last night," said Ulysses.

"These," answered his wife, pointing to the immense coil of cloths Oder carries, "are for the road. I long let it be thought that the weavings I wove each day of your absence to stave off the suitors I unwove that night. But the truth is, I never could bring myself to unwork work of mine; rather, once completed, I stowed each away with a view toward one day laying it all before you. Well, here they are."

"I have been home some while now—" began the wanderer.

"The moment was never right. Now, though, as you embark upon your final absence, I propose to fill that absence with images of all you may have missed."

By which is meant, thinks Ulysses, *Grandpappy's funeral, Telemachus' first day at school . . . in a word, everything to which I am henceforth minded to pay no further—* . . . and he directs Oder to take the weavings, and himself, belowdecks, explaining: "You shall be my bearer of the unglimpsed into the unglimpsed"; and, turning to Penelope, "Shall this suffice?"

Penelope bows and withdraws.

Oder goes aboard and, staggering under his weight of uprolled weavings, goes below. Ulysses puts to sea.

After a crossing all storm, they touch shore in Asia Minor and drive steadily inland—Ionia, Phrygia, Bactria, Turkmenistan—lighting on many a marvel but not as yet the land where none can tell an oar from a winnowing-fan.

Wearying at length of a world that, it seems, can supply all wonders but this, and sensing that death is nigh, Ulysses one day bethinks himself of the roll of Penelope's weavings stashed belowdecks in Oder's keeping, and gives orders that these now be brought out and set before him.

This takes a while—there are, it appears, 24 distinct pieces to be unscrolled upon the treeless plain they are now crossing—and by the time Oder has unfurled them all, dusk is gathering.

Ulysses, whose powers of viewing in a partial light are not what they once were, can make but little of the outspread weavings and instructs Oder to describe each in turn.

"On the first," quoth Oder, "we find broidered the words: 'His Homeward Course'. Each subsequent hanging depicts yourself and others in a situation. Here we see you taunting a big fellow with one eye-socket. This next shows yourself and a lady having at it amid some strangely human animals. And here you are sailing past three girls singing on an island"—and so on till he has furnished captions for each of the 24.

To Ulysses—who had spent the entire decade post-Troy shipwrecked on a sea-rock off Corinth until plucked thence by a passing freighter—none of all this conveys very much. With a sweeping gesture that takes in all his wife's works, he gives the command: "Wind it up!"

Oder is unsure what is being asked of him. "Master, do you now enjoin me to spool back up round the winnowing-fan all these many—?"

And Ulysses: "Round the—? Wait a minute. What did you just say?"

"Is it your will, Sire, that I once more roll up around this"—indicating the rod or spindle Penelope's pictures came off—"winnowing-fan—?"

Ulysses breaks in: "You mean this oar?"

To which, Oder: "What is 'oar'?"

How is it possible (thinks Ulysses) *that this islander born and bred should fail to recognize—? Wait, though* (he further muses), *this "islander born and bred" is a house-slave who has not been off the palace grounds 5 times in his life and who lately passed his only-ever recent sea voyage seasick belowdecks.*

Oder persists: "What is 'oar'?"

And Ulysses, only now first hearing—*What, indeed, is 'or'?*—suffers his gaze to dwell with real interest upon his wife's productions for the first time.