The Ears of Hermes
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The universe of the novel, and of the *Satyricon* in particular, is governed by coincidence. Encolpius and Giton board a ship and—what a coincidence!—the ship’s captain is none other than their enemy, Lichas. Of course, by the time they realize this, it is already too late. But what to do? Toss themselves into the sea? Hide themselves in a sack, hoping that when they reach port their friend Eumolpus will carry them down to safety, hidden amongst the luggage? Instead, Eumolpus convinces them to shave off their hair and cover their faces with *stigmata* as if they were two fugitive slaves, since, he reasons, such a transformation would render them unrecognizable. But as things turn out, Eumolpus’ solution is the worst they could have found—for in fact cutting one’s hair during a sea voyage is a sign of bad luck. So when another passenger observes them occupied in this inauspicious task, he denounces them to the captain (who in the meantime has seen in a dream exactly whom he has been transporting aboard his ship). Charged with bringing misfortune upon the ship and its crew, the two stowaways are hauled before Lichas who—of course—recognizes them. Eumolpus, therefore, finding himself and his companions in dire straits, attempts to defend his two friends, maintaining with great cheek that they boarded the ship deliberately, in order to beg pardon for their previous misbehavior. But Encolpius and Giton’s unfortunate attempt to disguise themselves instantly convinces Lichas that they had not, in fact, boarded the ship for this purpose.
noli, inquit, causam confundere . . . si ulbro venerunt, cur nudavere crinibus capita? vultum enim qui permutat, fraudem parat, non satisfactionem. 1

“Don’t try to disrupt the proceedings!” he said. “If they came on their own accord, why did they cut their hair? When someone alters his appearance, he intends to deceive, not to render satisfaction.”

Eumolpus does not throw in the towel so easily. At this point, the ship has already been transformed into a courtroom—or better yet, into a school of rhetoric—and he attempts to resolvere Lichas’ declamatio with the following rebuttal:

intellego . . . nihil magis obesse iuvenibus miseris quam quod nocte depo-
suerunt capillos: hoc argumento incidisse in navem videntur, non venisse.2

I am fully aware that nothing harms the case of these poor young men more than the fact that at some point on the night in question they did away with their hair. Based on this argumentum, it would appear that they stumbled upon this ship by accident, rather than coming aboard by express purpose.

The “Inferential” Sign

Eumolpus and Giton’s freshly-shaven heads are an argumentum—for now we can say the “proof”3—of the fact that they boarded the ship not to seek pardon from Lichas, but simply because they did not know that he was its captain. Eumolpus realizes that Encolpius and Giton’s intentions when they boarded the ship can be “inferred” from this: They must have come on board by chance, not to seek pardon from its captain—otherwise, once they were aboard and understood (heavens!) where they were, they would not have cut off their hair to avoid being recognized. Eumolpus has studied his rhetoric well and employs the correct terminology: Quintilian tells us that the natura omnium argumentorum is in fact ut sit ratio per ea quae certa sunt fidem dubiis adferens4 (“to be a ratio capable of providing certainty to that which is doubt-

1. Petr. Sat. 107.7ff.  
3. The “argument” of this chapter—namely, the Latin word argumentum—is extremely vast. In these pages, I do not intend to exhaust the subject, which would have necessitated a detailed discussion of a huge number of passages, but rather to indicate a possible route through some uses of this word, above all those that are less well known. For a general discussion of argumentum, its most recurrent meanings and the principal biographical references, see Lumpe 1984, 299ff.  
4. Quint. Inst. orat. 5.10.8ff. Cf. also 5.10.11, ergo cum sit argumentum ratio probationem
ful by means of what is certain”). In order to fulfill this function—i.e., to give certainty to that which is doubtful by means of that which is certain—argumentum has an inferential structure: it is a sign understood “as a single perceivable phenomenon, which refers to a fact not directly knowable.” In the “trial” sketched out by Petronius, two opinions are contrasted, and it is in doubt whether Encolpius and Giton got on board the ship to seek pardon from Lichas (as Eumolpus sustains) or if they happened upon it by chance (as Lichas argues). The act of cutting their hair functions as a ratio capable of “providing certainty” to that which is “in doubt” by means of what is “certain”: it is an argumentum in every respect, therefore.

**Everyday Inferences and Metaphors of Argumentum**

The inferential mechanism underlying argumentum is clear in uses of this term. As an example, we may take an amusing scene of Plautus’ *Truculentus* in which the soldier Stratophanes receives news from the slave girl Astaphium that her mistress, the courtesan Phronesium, has given birth. In actual matter of fact, it is all a ruse: Phronesium has procured herself a baby from another mother and intends to pass it off as the soldier’s child. Stratophanes wants more than anything to believe that the child is his: *ehem, ecquid mei similest?* (“My! Does he look like me at all?”) he asks. Astaphium is quick with an answer: *rogas? / quin ubi natust machaeram et clipeum poscebat sibi?* (“Do you need to ask? He was not born but a moment when he asked for a sword and shield”). Stratophanes has no doubt about it at that point: *meus est, scio iam de argumentis* (“Yes, he’s mine; I’m sure of it from the argumenta”). If a newborn immediately asks for a shield and a sword, it means that he is Stratophanes’ son: it is possible to “infer” from these argumenta who the child’s father is and to have proof of its paternity.

Something similar happens in *Amphitruo*, when Sosia must confront the aggression of his double, the god Mercury, who has taken on his identity in every respect (appearance, stature, bearing and so forth). Mercury/Sosia is trying to convince the unlucky slave that he is the real Sosia. The battle is hard-fought indeed, because Mercury/Sosia, being a god, knows all the

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5. See Manetti 1987, 205ff., in reference to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium.*
most hidden secrets of the real Sosia’s life and uses them as proof of the fact that he is the “real” Sosia. It is already an ordeal when the true Sosia, now desperate, asks Mercury/Sosia to tell him what he was doing in his tent while the rest of the army was fighting against the army of Pterelaus: *victus sum, si dixeris* (“I’m done for, if you can tell me”), he declares. But Mercury/Sosia does not even bat an eyelid: he recounts that in the tent there was a barrel of wine and that filling a bottle from it, he drank the entire thing. Sosia has lost and Mercury/Sosia remarks: *quid nunc? vincon’ argumentis te non esse Sosiam?* (“And so? Have I won or not, with these *argumenta* that you are not Sosia?”) The mechanisms are the same. A certain element (the knowledge of what happened privately in the tent during the battle) functions as a sign from which one can infer a certain conclusion, an inference that can then be used as proof for substantiating that which is not certain in itself precisely by means of that which is.

As the evidence of Plautus shows, the use of *argumentum* in the sense of “inferential sign” or “proof” is not the exclusive patrimony of orators and lawyers. It is also part of the common language and boasts of quite ancient testimony. This should come as no surprise, since what *argumentum* expresses—inference through signs, and the use of that inference as proof in situations of uncertainty—is a necessary part not only of forensic activity but also of life in general. Naturally, orators and lawyers give us the best “metalinguistic” analyses of the term. Yet, even more interesting than these precise definitions are certain images that they employ to describe the nature of *argumentum*. Take two passages of Cicero, for example: *argumentum . . . rerum vox est, naturae vestigium, veritatis nota* (“*Argumentum* is a voice of things, an imprint left by nature, a mark of truth”) and *haec causa ab argumentis, a coniectura, ab iis signis, quibus veritas inlustrari solet, ad testis

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10. For Quintilian, cf. above, n. 4. See also *Rhét. ad Herenn.* 2.8, *argumentum est, per quod rei coarguitur certioribus argumentis et magis firma suspicione* (“*argumentum* is that through which the accusation is confirmed with surer arguments and more certain suspicions”). The examples offered are interesting: *si tumore et livore decoloratum corpus est mortui, significant eum veneno necatum* (“if the corpse is discolored by bloating or lividity, this means that the subject was poisoned”). The inferential structure appears to be expressed, in fact, through the classic instrument of the hypothetic period (Manetti 1987, 206); see also Calboli’s (1969, 231ff.) note *ad loc.* See also *Cic. Top.* 2.8, *esse . . . argumentum . . . rationem quae rei dubiae faciat fidelum* (“*argumentum* is . . . a ratio that gives certainty to something in doubt”). Boethius commented in his commentary on Cicero’s *Topica* that *argumentum . . . est, quod rem arguit id est probat, nihil vero probari nisi dubium potest* (“*argumentum* is something that *arguit* or that furnishes a proof: but something cannot be proven unless it is in doubt”) (Migne 1844, 64, 1048). And Isidore (*Etym.* 18.15.5) insisted on the hypothetical and “investigative” nature of the word: *argumentum . . . sola investigatione inventis veritatem* (“*argumentum* discovers the truth only through investigation”), etc.
tota reducta est ("This case has boiled down entirely to the testimony of witnesses—away with argumenta, hypothesis and those signs by which the truth is normally illustrated!").

Eloquent metaphors indeed: an argumentum is a kind of "voice of things," an "imprint of nature." Through an argumentum, truth is revealed by means of a "sign," or "receives light" from it. Ciceronian representation is no doubt rich in figures for defining argumentum, but always the same attribute is emphasized: the ability to communicate a meaning that would otherwise remain unexpressed (the voice of things, the imprint of nature, the mark of truth) or to offer something the possibility of "being illustrated," of "standing out." This final image, in fact, presents considerations of particular interest.

An Inference Is a Flash

Let us look at the relationship between argumentum and the verb to which it is related: arguo. In the very first instance, this verb means ostendere, patescere, manifestare and so presupposes, in a certain sense, a process of "revelation." Its semantic connection with argumentum is clear, since argumentum (the inferential sign) also presupposes a kind of revelation. As we have seen, the argumentum employed by Astaphium in persuading the soldier Stratophanes (the fact that the child "asked for a sword and shield" as soon as it was born) implies the revelation that the child is, in fact, his son and not someone else’s. An argumentum, then, realizes the process of arguere, actually producing the revelation that the verb implies.

Of course, this is precisely the semantic quality that substantives in -men/-mentum have: they are "des réalités concrètes ou abstraites qui, en quelque sort, enferment en elles le procès, soit qu’elles tirent leur existence du procès (type resultatif) soit qu’elles se manifestent par l’exercice de ce procès (type actif)." Argumentum gets its quality precisely from the process of arguere; its very existence implies this. Therefore, we may analyze some of the many cases in which the revelation realized by the verb arguo presupposes the existence of a "medium," something through which this process is realized. Seneca, for example, says the following in reference to the Minotaur: scelus . . . matris arguit vultu truci ambiguus infans ("The ambiguous child revealed its mother’s guilt by its grim visage"). Pasiphae’s guilt is revealed

by the Minotaur’s “grim visage”; otherwise, it would never have been known. Vergil uses *arguo* in the same way in his rather sententious hemistich *degeneres animos timor arguit* (“Their fear revealed their base character”). It is their fear that allows the baseness of their character, normally imperceptible, to be revealed. A “grim visage” and fear, therefore, can fairly be defined *argumenta*, since they realize the process of *arguere*, since it is possible to infer from them the guilt of *bestialitas* in the first case and baseness of character in the second. That is to say, any element (a grim visage, fear) that has the ability to *arguere* what is immediately indiscernible (hidden culpability, the depths of human nature) functions as an *argumentum*.

Let us explore this problem a little further. In fact, let us try to determine if there is a more fundamental meaning from which these particular “designations” of *arguo* and *argumentum* (i.e., “to reveal, demonstrate,” and so on) are derived. One way to go about this is to examine how the adjective *argūtus* is used, since it is likewise related to *arguo*. As it turns out, in many cases the adjective *argūtus* indicates that which “strikes” the senses with particular force. When it is used in reference to auditory perception, for instance, *argūtus* accompanies the mention of a clear or penetrating sound. A tongue, a pipe, a swan’s song and so on, may all be said to be *argūtus*. Likewise with visual impressions: the eyes may be called *arguti* in reference to their capacity to reveal the feelings of the soul, just as the hands may be called *argutae* in reference to their expressiveness when gesticulating. Evidently, hands and eyes may “strike the attention” or somehow “stand out” in the same way that the sound of a reed pipe and a swan’s song do. The same is true also for smell and taste: the aroma of oil may be *argūtus* (we might say “sharp” or “penetrating”), just as the flavor of pears and figs.

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18. I use the terminology of Benveniste 1974, I, 5 and 80.
19. On the uses of this very useful adjective the survey of Iodice Martino 1986, 34ff.
20. Ernout and Meillet 1965, 46, s.v. *arguo*. Cf. the series such as *status*, *statuo*, *statū-tus*; *tribus*, *tribuo*, *tribū-tus*; *cornū*, *cornū-tus*.
25. Cic. *Leg.* 1.9.27, *oculi nimis arguti, quamadmodum animo affecti simus, loquuntur* (“very expressive eyes communicate the affections of the heart”).
26. Aul. Gell. *NA.* 1.5, *manus argutae admodum animo affectuosa* (“very expressive hands inclined to gesticulate”). Cicero (*De orat.* 3.59.218) recounts that the *manus* of the orator is *minus arguta*, *digitis subsequenti verba, non exprimens* (“less expressive than that of the actor and accompanies the words with the movement of the fingers, but does not express them”).
may be argūtus\textsuperscript{28} (we would say “strong” or “sharp”). Argūtus, therefore, corresponds to the ability to strike the attention, to stand out, to be distinct.

It is worth examining the problem from an etymological point of view as well. Arguo, argumentum, argūtus are surely related to a form *argus, meaning “clarity” or “clearness”—the same root *arg- that we find in Greek argos (“clear, shining”) and in Hittite hargi (“clear, white”).\textsuperscript{29} In Latin, argentum (“shining metal”) and argilla (“white earth”) are also from this root.\textsuperscript{30} The form in -u-, as in *argu-, which forms the basis of argu-o, argu-mentum and argu-tus, appears in Greek argu-ros (“silver, shining metal”).\textsuperscript{31} The etymological meaning of this group of words seems to rest, then, in the image of clarity, of radiance. We can therefore explain why the adjective argūtus implies the notion of being sharp, penetrating and standing out. The original image is that of a “flash” of light that stands out from its surroundings and strikes the attention because of its brightness. But there is another consequence of this that interests us more directly. We know now that the ability possessed by words like arguo and argumentum to reveal something hidden is expressed through the image of a flash of light striking the attention, and Cicero, as we have seen, represented argumentum as a kind of “voice of things,” an “imprint of nature.” He was convinced that through an argumentum the truth is revealed by means of a “sign” or that from it the truth “receives light”—all images quite close to the original etymological meaning of the word. In short, when one adopts an argumentum—the ratio per ea quae certa sunt fidem dubiis aderens\textsuperscript{32}—a kind of flash is produced. An inference is a light that goes on, a beam of light that comes out of the darkness and strikes the attention.

**Iconographic Inference**

Other specific uses of argumentum as “inference” are of particular interest in the history of the Roman intellectual lexicon: for example, those connected with iconography and the other figural arts, where argumentum is used to define a type of symbolic communication. In this regard, Pliny, in the last books of his *Natural History*, provides us with some of the best examples. Parrhasius was becoming famous for his representations of the people of Athens:

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{28} Palladius 3.25.4 and 4.10.26.
\textsuperscript{29} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.vv. argumentum and arguo.
\textsuperscript{30} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.vv. argentum and argilla.
\textsuperscript{31} Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.v. argentum.
\textsuperscript{32} Quint. *Inst. orat.* 5.10.8ff.
pinxit demon Atheniensium argumento quoque ingenioso. ostendebat
namque varium iracundum iniustum inconstantem, eundem exorabi-
lem elementem misericordem; gloriosum . . . excelsum umilem, ferocem
fugacemque et omnia pariter.\textsuperscript{33}

He painted the Athenian people making use of an ingenious *argumentum*.
In fact, he represented it as flighty, irascible, unjust, inconstant, but at the
same time embracing, indulgent, pitying; proud . . . sublime, humble, fierce
and cheap, all in the same measure.

Wishing to represent the changeable nature of the Athenian people, Par-
rhasius resorted to an ingenious expedient, capturing in a single image
several faces that expressed a variety of contrasting psychological disposi-
tions.\textsuperscript{34} Pliny defines this “pictorial device”\textsuperscript{35} as an *argumentum*, and indeed
we remain always in the realm of inference. In order to paint “something
that is difficult to make concrete”\textsuperscript{36}—the shifting nature of a people’s char-
acter—Parrhasius availed himself of a complex of signs from which it was
possible to infer what he wished to express.

Again according to Pliny, the artist Nealces does something similar when
he finds himself needing to communicate something that would be difficult
to express with the normal techniques of painting:

\begin{quote}
cum proelium navale Persarum et Aegyptiorum pinxisset, quod in Nilo,
cuius est aqua maris similis, factum volebat intellegi, argumento declaravit
quod arte non poterat: asellum enim bibentem in litore pinxit et crocodilum
insidiantem ei.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

When he had painted the naval battle between the Persians and the Egyp-
tians, wishing to make it understood that the battle had taken place on the
waters of the Nile, which resemble those of the sea, he expressed through
an *argumentum* what he was not able to express simply through his art: on
the banks he depicted a donkey drinking along with a crocodile lying in
wait for it.

Nealces wished to communicate that the waters on which the battle
took place were those of the Nile. But given that the course of the Nile is

\textsuperscript{33} Plin. *Nat. hist.* 35.69.
\textsuperscript{34} See Corso’s note in Conte 1988, 5, 365ff.
\textsuperscript{35} This is the translation proposed by Mugellesi in Conte 1988, 367 (“risorsa pittorica”).
\textsuperscript{36} Thus Ferri 1946, 155, comparing the word *argumentum* used by Pliny in this context with
the Greek *paradeigma*.
\textsuperscript{37} Plin. *Nat. hist.* 35.142.
very wide, resembling a sea more than a river, it was difficult to allow the
viewer of the painting to understand that the expanse of water on which
the battle took place belonged to a river and not to the sea. The painter
therefore utilizes an argumentum—a complex of signs from which it would
be possible to infer what his pictorial art was incapable of communicating
on its own. On the litus of what appeared to be a sea, Nealces painted an
ass ambushed by a crocodile. Since the crocodile was an animal typical of
the Nile (and definitely not a marine creature), this element rendered the
waters immediately identifiable: the viewer would understand that it was a
river and not the sea that was depicted there. The same may be said for the
fact that an ass was represented in the act of drinking the water in front of
it: obviously it is fresh water, rather than sea water, if the ass is drinking
it. As for the painter’s specific choice of a donkey, it is likely that we have
here an illusion to the fact that the king of Persia who was defeated in that
battle, Artaxerxes III Ochos, had the surname Onos (“donkey”).

At this point Nealces’ argumentum quite resembles what we would call a rebus: a
“donkey” (The Great King) ambushed by a “crocodile” (the Nile) functions
as a kind of scholion—“the king Artaxerxes III Ochos, called Onos, defeated
by the Egyptians on the waters of the Nile”—transposed into the figural arts.

Another example. The Spartans Saura and Batracus built the temples
that stood inside the Porticus Octaviae. Some maintained that they, being
quite wealthy men, had financed the construction themselves in the hope of
setting up an inscription that contained their names. This wish was denied.
However, it seems that Saura and Batracus obtained their desire in any case:
sunt certe etiamnum in columnarum spiris inscalptae nominem eorum argumen-
to lacerta atque rana (“There can be seen even now a frog and a lizard
carved into the torus of the columns as an argumentum of their names”).

In Greek, saura means “lizard” and batrachos means “frog,” and affixing
designs of these two animals to their work, Saura and Batracus had practi-
cally “signed” it—thus remedying in some way the absence of the inscription
they so desired. Naturally, there is a difference. The inscription would have
listed their names explicitly, whereas the carvings of a frog and a lizard could
at best allow their names to be “inferred.” But for this reason, Pliny says that
the two images functioned as an argumentum.

We could go on giving examples. However, it seems worth suggesting

38. Cf. Ael. Var. hist. 4.8; Ferri 1946, 202ff.
40. We know other cases of artists who used to “sign” their works with an image instead of
their name. See, e.g., the case of the mosaicist Lucius Ceius Pavo who would sign his nomen and
praenomen, but in place of his cognomen, would place the image of a peacock (cf. Conte 1988, 603).
41. Plin. Nat. hist. 29.54, the interlacing of serpents and their productive union in causa videtur
esse, quare exterae gentes caduceum in pavis argumentis circumdata effigie anguim fecentie (they put the
that the term *argumentum* in the particular meaning we have identified here—“iconographic symbol”—could be useful in defining an aspect of figural communication for which we lack precise terminology. To see what I mean, let us take at random one of an infinite number of possible examples: Dosso Dossi’s *Allegory of Fortune.*\(^42\) In this painting, we see a nude woman framed by a fluttering veil, sitting atop a transparent ball (a kind of bubble of air) and holding a cornucopia. One of her feet is bare and on the other she wears a kind of shoe. In order to describe the functions of these iconographic elements we would probably have to use expressions like “symbol,” “sign,” “allegorical traits” or any number of other possibilities. In ancient terminology, however, all of these symbolic elements would have been defined as *argumenta,* since from them it is possible to infer the specific qualities of Fortune: her fragility (the air bubble upon which she sits), her erratic and uneven step (her feet, one shod, one bare) and so forth. Imitating Pliny’s Latin, we could say that *translucida bulla aere inflata argumentum est Fortunae levitatis,* while *pedes quorum unus calciatus alter nudatus argumenta sunt inconstantiae eius.* And given, then, that these *argumenta,* taken all together, allow us to infer the identity of the female figure of the painting, we could conclude that Dosso Dossi *Fortunam ingenioso quodam argumento pinxit: fecit enim eam translucida bulla sedentem.* . . . In this light, iconographic treatises like Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* are immense repositories of *argumenta.*

**The “Many Meanings” of Argumentum**

As Quintilian remarks, *argumentum* is a word that has “many meanings”:

> argumentum . . . plura significat. nam et fabulae ad actum scenaorum compositae argumenta dicuntur, et *<cum>* orationum Ciceronis uelut thema [ipse] exponit Pedianus inquit: ‘argumentum tale est’ (fr. 31 Ofen-

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\(^42\) Conserved in the Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California.
loch) . . . quo appareit omnem ad scribendum destinatam materiam ita appellari. nec mirum, cum id inter opifices quoque sit uulgatum, unde Vergili ‘argumentum ingens,’ uulgoque paulo numerosius opus dicitur argumentosum.43

_{Argumentum_} has many meanings. In fact, the stories composed to be represented on stage are called _argumenta_, and when Pedianus gives the theme of Cicero’s orations he says, “the _argumentum_ is as follows.” . . . From this, it ensues that any subject destined to be developed in written form is called by this name. And no wonder, given that this word is very popular among artists, whence the Vergilian “immense _argumentum_,” and that it is commonly said that a scattered work is an _opus argumentosum_.

Quintilian truly appreciates the problem. In fact, in Latin, _argumentum_ is largely used in the sense of the “theme” or “subject” of a work—its “argument,” as we still say today44—and frankly in this instance the inferential character of the word seems entirely absent. The _materia ad scribendum destinata_ (whether it is the subject of a comedy or of an oration, or forms the subject of a work of art, such as the story of Io carved on Turnus’ shield in Vergil), seems, at least at first glance, to have nothing to do with the flash of light that comes out of the darkness and causes what otherwise would have remained unknown to “stand out.” But let us take another look.45

_The Subject of Figural Narration_

There is no dearth of examples of _argumentum_ referring to the subject of a work of art. Quintilian claims that this use was “very popular among art-

43. Quint. _Inst. orat._ 5.10.8–10.
44. Cf. _TLL_ II, 548, 37ff.
45. As for the term _argumentosus_ used by Quintilian (_Inst. orat._ 5.10.8) in the syntagma _opus argumentosum_ to indicate a work that is disorganized, we may think here that what is being underscored is the excessive domination of the “subject” over its formal realization. _Argumentosus_ is in fact a formation in -_osus_ like _famosus_, _ponderosus_, _damnosus_, _morbosus_, _vitiosus_, etc., that underlines the strong predomination of a trait in characterizing something (Leumann 19772, 347, “reich an, versehen mit”; Ernout 1949; Guerrini 1984, 61ff.; Knox 1985, 90ff.). In different cases, the addition of the suffix -_osus_ provokes formations with a marked negative sense: in Italian, they can be translated with the adjective _troppo_ (“too”) as “too heavy” (_ponderosus_), “too talked-about” (_famosus_), “with too many vices” (_vitiosus_), etc. _Argumentosus_ would then mean “that has too many themes,” that is, without elegance because the theme dominates too much the form that it has received. The vision of a work of art presupposed by such terminology distinguishes cleanly between content and form: one expects that the artists proceeds by giving form to a pre-existing “canvas,” rendering it _argumentosus_ by means of his formal care. In the case of _opera argumentosae_ this process of “giving form” has not been completed.
ists.” However, when the “subject” of a work of art is designated by the word *argumentum*, it always corresponds to a story—a narration of the kind that may be represented on a doorway, a shield, a bowl, a sail and so forth. Cicero recounts of Verres that *ex eborae diligentissime perfecta argumenta erant in valvis: ea detrahenda curavit omnia* (“on the doors stood some *argumenta* sculpted in ivory with great precision, all of which he had removed”). Meanwhile, in the passage to which Quintilian alludes above, Vergil describes the *imagines* that adorn Turnus’ shield like this:

In gold Io graced the smooth shield—her horns raised, covered in bristly hairs, already transformed into a cow (an impressive *argumentum*)—along with Argos, the girl’s guard and her father Inachus pouring forth his waters from an engraved urn.

There is also Ovid’s narration of the contest between Athena and Arachne, with his description of the haughty girl’s work: *et vetus in tela deducitur argumentum* (“an old *argumentum* is woven on the cloth”). The story represented is that of Europa seduced by the bull, along with other mytholog-

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46. Cf. *TLL* II, 550, 1ff. where, however, the two meanings of *argumentum*—as “iconographic symbol,” that discussed in paragraph 4, and as “subject,” or better, an artistically represented “narrative”—are confused.


48. Verg. *Aen.* 7.789ff. One notes, in fact, that in this regard Serv. in *Aen.* 7.791 makes a curious attempt to attribute an inferential value also to the *argumentum* named by Vergil in the case of Turnus’ shield: *’argumentum ingenii aut fabula, ut Cicero argumenta in valvis aut vera argumentum, quod se Graecum probare cupiebat. hoc enim Amata superius dixit ‘Inachus Acrisiusque patres mediasque Mycenae’* (“’argumentum ingenii’ means either the subject, as when Cicero says, ’on the doorway stood some *argumenta* or *argumentum* in its proper sense, because doing so he wished to show that he was Greek. Amata, in fact, had said this same thing before, ‘Inachus and Acrisius and the center of Mycenae are his ancestors.’”) We need to consider that Servius refers to the moment in which Amata declares that, if Lavinia strictly needs to find a foreign husband, Turnus also fits the bill. Consequently, the commentator suggests that Vergil had Turnus carry those images on his shield to ‘show’ his Greek origin. Vergil certainly did not mean this by his *argumentum*. Nevertheless, from a more general point of view, we cannot say Servius was wrong, either: in fact, Turnus does have this story on his shield, and not another, in order to declare his own origin. Servius is forcing the meaning of the text, taking advantage of the fact that in the story those images function objectively as an iconographic *argumentum* from which it is possible to “infer” the hero’s origins, in order to attribute the meaning of “inferential sign” to the word *argumentum* used by Vergil in the text; however, here it means something else.

cal tales of the same type. And again when he describes the bowl given to Aeneas: *fabricaverat Alcon / Myleus et longo caelaverat argumentum* ("Alcon of Mylos had made it and upon it he had engraved a long *argumentum*.")

Many more examples could be given. But it is worth examining this final passage of Ovid in greater detail.51

The scene represented by Alcon on the bowl is the war of the Seven Against Thebes. Ovid, that master of artistic description, ingeniously alerts his audience to what *argumentum* is engraved on the bowl when he writes that *urbs erat et septem posses ostendere portas: / haec pro nomine erant et, quae foret illa, docebant* ("there was represented a city—you could point out each of its seven gates, which stood in place of its name, and explained what city it was")52 and later that *ante urbem exsequiae tumulique ignesque rogique / effusaeque comas et apertae pectora matres / significat luctum* ("before the city funerals, graves, flames, pyres, mothers with their hair let loose and their breasts bared indicate mourning").53 In some sense, Ovid pushes the limits of *ekphrasis* here: not limiting himself to merely describing a work of art, he also entertains himself in revealing how it functions. The reader is not given a description of the scene mediated—that is, already interpreted—by the poet, but is allowed to behold the bare figural elements. At the same time, the poet explains to him how to proceed in their interpretation. The peculiarity of Ovid’s method really stands out when compared with how Vergil goes about his description of Turnus’ shield. Vergil announces the “subject” of the work immediately, giving the names of the characters, and so on: there is Io, already transformed into a cow; there is Argus who watches over her, and Inachus who pours forth his waters from an urn. Ovid proceeds in reverse. He does not say "there was the city of Thebes with its seven gates; there were the Theban mothers in grief, with their hair let loose and their breasts bared." Instead, he begins with what the reader/viewer actually sees, and only then invites him to guess the “subject” of the work. He describes a city with seven gates, saying that these gates stood for the city’s “name”; he represents funeral pyres, women with their hair let loose and their breasts bared, and only later declares that this “signifies” mourning.

51. Prop. Carm. 3.9.13ff. (artists excel in art for various reasons, Lysippus for statues that appear to be alive, Calamis for having perfected the horse, etc.: *argumenta magis sunt Menotis addita formae* (the *argumenta* are, in a particular fashion, present in the casts of Mentor)—Mentor was considered the most illustrious of engravers; see also Suet. Tib. 44.2, *Parrhasius quoque tabulam . . . legatam sibi sub condicione, ut si argumento offendertur decies pro ea sestertium acciperet* ("a painting of Parrhasius . . . left to him on condition that if he was offended by the *argumentum*, he could receive a million sesterces instead"), etc. Ov. Met. 6.69.
Ovid is very true to life, since our enjoyment of figural narration works exactly in this way. In order to guess the subject of a work of art, the viewer makes inferences from the individual figural elements that he sees before him. If he does not have an interpreter to mediate this process for him—a poet to describe the work ecphrastically, didaskalia, a Touring Guide—the viewer must infer on his own that the city with seven gates is Thebes, that women with their hair let loose and their breasts bared must mean “mourning.” Only then does the subject of the scene become clear: the war of the Seven Against Thebes, which caused so much grief for those involved.

*Argumentum* therefore maintains its inferential character when it is used to indicate the subject of a work of the figural arts. In fact, what a viewer “really” has in front of him is simply a complex of incompletely codified signs: it is up to him to infer from them the “subject” represented there. For this reason, a story narrated by means of a figural code may rightfully be called an *argumentum*. The figural signs are “names,” elements that signify something—and the audience must use them as an *argumentum* to identify what it is they communicate.

**The Subject of a Literary Text**

What about the *argumentum* of a comedy or an oration? When Mercury, in the prologue of *Amphitruo*, declares *nunc animum advortite / dum huius argumentum eloquar comoediae* (“now pay attention, so I can tell you the *argumentum* of this comedy”), the spectators know that what follows will be a narration: a summary of the comedy, its content. The same holds true for the summaries of Cicero’s orations that Quintus Asconius Pedianus supplies as a preface to his commentaries. There does not seem to be anything to infer here. Naturally, we might conclude that the use of *argumentum* to indicate the subject of a literary work is simply transferred from the figural arts. Quintilian tells us that the term *argumentum* was popular among *opifices*: We might not be surprised, then, if *argumentum*—used “properly” by artists to indicate the subjects of their own works—was then used “improperly” to define any type of theme or subject, even in the total absence of the inferential process. This explanation is not very convincing, however: we have seen that *argumentum* tends to maintain its relation to the world of signs and inference, even when this seems to be absent. But—to make a small play on words—we can actually use this observation as an *argumentum*

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of the fact that *argumentum*, even when it designates the subject of a literary text, maintains its connection to the semiotic sphere. At any rate, this “inference” can be confirmed by a simple consideration.

The *argumentum* of a literary work is not the work itself; it is a brief description of its contents. The play *Amphitruo* is one thing (a comedy by the playwright Plautus, recited on stage). The summary of its plot given in the prologue by Mercury is something else entirely. Suetonius even employs the verb *explicare* to describe the relationship between the plot (the “sketch” or “outline” of a play) and its realization on stage: *parabatur et in noctem spectaculum, quo argumenta inferorum per Aegyptios et Aethiopas explicarentur* (“a night time showing was also being prepared, in which the *argumenta* of the infernal beings were to be ‘performed’ by Egyptian and Ethiopian actors”).

Likewise for the summaries of Cicero’s speeches: Asconius Pedianus does not pretend that his summaries are a substitute for the orations themselves: they are simply “sketches.” Only shameless students and unscrupulous professors would consider reading a summary of the *Aeneid* an acceptable substitute for reading the actual poem. A summary of the *Aeneid* is a tool—something that helps us get an idea of Vergil’s work, referring us back to the original. But it is something different from the work itself.

The inferential principle holding for the elements of a work of art realized by an *opifex* now appears to hold in the case of the *argumentum* of a literary work, as well—albeit in different form. From the summary of *Amphitruo* provided by Mercury in the play’s prologue, the spectator can only infer what the drama true and proper will be. Here again is that “flash of light” shining forth from the darkness: the subject of the comedy “stands out” through the *argumentum*. But the *argumentum* recited by Mercury is not the comedy itself; it is a complex of signs that permit the audience to know, in brief, the plot of the comedy about to see performed. So too for the speeches of Cicero summarized by Asconius Pedianus in the prefaces to his commentaries. Each *argumentum* is a sign that stands for and refers to the original work, allowing us to recall it. In some sense, it is a real pity that for us the “argument” of a work means simply its “topic” or “subject.” In normal linguistic perception, the semiotic value of “the summary” has in fact been lost: No one today would consider the CliffsNotes version of the *Aeneid* an *argumentum* from which it is possible to “infer” the epic poem written by Vergil.

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56. As the “summary” of a theatrical work or of any literary text, *argumentum* also bears the sense that we give to words such as “action,” “plot.” On the relationships between the send of *argumentum* as *Inhaltsangabe* of a work (the normal sense in Plautus and Terence) and as a “theme” to develop, cf. Primmer 1964, 61ff., esp. 64–65. On Cic. *Inv.* 1.27 and the problematic rhetoric connected to *argumentum* as “subject” of a work, above all in regard to the novel, see Barwick 1928,
The Apologue and Unlimited Semiosis

In one area of ancient literary production, the term *argumentum* seems to have enjoyed particularly good fortune: the Aesopic fable, the apologue. Already at the conclusion of Ennius’ celebrated “fable of the lark” we read: *hoc erit tibi argumentum semper in promptum situm, / ne quid expectes amicos quod tute agere possies* (“you will have this *argumentum* always at hand, so you don’t expect your friends to do what you can do yourself”). In Ennius’ opinion, this fable would be a good *argumentum* for sustaining a certain theory of behavior: namely, not expecting your friends to do what you can do yourself. Phaedrus frequently uses this word in a similar sense—for finding a “moral” in a fable, for showing the reader how he can apply what he has read to his own life. For example, take the story of the brigands who kill the mule that proudly carried their sacks of money, while sparing one that humbly carried sacks of barley: *hoc argumento tuta est hominum tenuitas / magnae periculo sunt opes obnoxiae* (“on the basis of this *argumentum*, men’s poverty is secure, while great wealth is subject to danger”). Or that of the viper that bites a file: *mordaciorem qui improbo dente adpetit / hoc argumento se describi sentiat* (“He who rashly bites that which is more biting than him should recognize that he himself is described here”). Or that of the thief who lights a lantern at the altar of Jupiter only to sack the temple by its light: *quot res contineat hoc argumentum utiles, / non explicabit alius quam qui repperit: / significant primo . . . secundum ostendit . . . novissime interdictit . . .* (“none can explain better than he who wrote this *argumentum* how many useful things are contained within it: in the first place, it means . . . in the second place, he shows . . . , and finally he warns . . . ”). Or that of the billy-goats who complain to Jupiter because he gave beards not only to them, but also to young she-goats: *hoc argumentum monet ut sustineas tibi / habitu esse similes, qui sint virtute impares* (“this *argumentum* warns us to accept that those who are unequal to us in worth are similar to us in aspect”). Or—finally—that of the bald man who hits himself over the head trying to swat a fly: *hoc argumento ei modo decet veniam dari, / qui casu peccat* (“on the basis of this *argumentum*, one should pardon he who does wrong involuntarily”).

261ff.

In each case, *argumentum* refers directly to the fable—to its narrative. Thus, it is not a summary to which *argumentum* refers, but the text itself (even if the text of a fable is necessarily synthetic and brief). Of course, the Aesopic fable is a very special kind of text, since its chief purpose is not to entertain but to teach. It is a kind of apologue, a text that exists only to be immediately interpreted and turned into a concrete application on the moral plane. As Ennius says, a fable is an *argumentum* to keep on hand in order to avoid making a certain mistake. Phaedrus, as we have seen, goes on listing the various “morals” that may be gleaned from the fable/*argumentum* he has just recounted.63 This Roman use of *argumentum* to designate the paradigmatic and didactic power of the apologue is quite interesting. It is as if the conventional *ho muthos dēloi* of the Aesopic tradition has undergone a reversal of perspective, transformed into an explicit process of inference. It is not so much the fable that “reveals” certain truths (*ho muthos dēloi*), but rather the audience that must infer them (*argumentum*).64

In the case of Aesopic fable, then, the inferential meaning of *argumentum* remains apparent: the text is not so much valuable in itself as in the fact that something else may be inferred from it (a moral, a precept that can be immediately applied elsewhere). As an *argumentum*, a fable of the Aesopic tradition contains an explicit invitation to enlist its text in the process of unlimited semiosis.

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64. Moreover, it has been rightly noted that Phaedrus tends to attribute an explicitly “judicial” character to the structure of the Aesopic fable: Manetti 1987, 227ff. Cf. also Gibbs 1999.