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The Mirror of Reception: Identifying with Benjamin Li in Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered*

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Abstract:

My most intense experience of identification came about when I first read Chang-rae Lee's 2010 novel *The Surrendered*. This article explores how that experience of identification, originating in my identity as an Asian American classicist, steered me toward an idiosyncratic and, ultimately, disconcerting reading of the novel. The novel introduces a character named Benjamin Li during a series of chapters set at a missionary school in Manchuria. I viewed Benjamin as the Odysseus of *The Surrendered*. Lee's nuanced engagement with the mythological tradition remakes twentieth-century conflicts in East Asia in the image of the Trojan War and its aftermath.

Keywords: reception, Asian American, identification, focalization, Odysseus, Homer, Sophocles

What happens when we identify with a fictional character? Rita Felski has recently described identification as "an affinity that is based on some sense of similarity" (2019, 79). My most intense experience of identification came about when I first read Chang-rae Lee's 2010 novel *The Surrendered*. This article explores how that experience of identification, originating in my identity as an Asian American classicist, steered me toward an idiosyncratic and, ultimately, disconcerting reading of the novel.[1] I initially encountered *The Surrendered* in graduate school. A friend

1. I am indebted in the conception of this article to Elaine Kim's 1994 essay "Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*." Kim 1994, 4 centers her own experience as a Korean American reader of *Dictée*, observing with refreshing candor that "The first time I glanced at *Dictée*, I was put off by the book. I thought that Theresa Cha was talking not to me but rather to someone so remote from myself that I could not recognize 'him.' The most I could hope for, I thought, was to be permitted to stand beside her while she addressed 'him.'" I have attempted to interrogate my own responses to *The Surrendered* in a similar spirit of candor.

explained that the book engaged with the legacy of the Korean War and featured a protagonist named Hector from a town in New York called Ilion.[2] I was a Korean American classicist who had never seen the pieces of his identity mirrored with such precision, so I bought the novel at a used bookstore and started reading. Almost a decade later I keep thinking about a character who only appears in 2 of the novel's 19 chapters.

The Surrendered tells the story of a love triangle involving Hector Brennan, June Singer (née Han), and Sylvie Tanner (née Binet), moving from Manchuria in the 1930s to Korea in the 1950s to New York and Italy in the 1980s. The character with whom I identified was a comparatively minor figure, Benjamin Li. The novel introduces him during a sequence of chapters set at a missionary school in Manchuria in 1934. These chapters recount the tragic deaths of Sylvie's parents, Francis and Jane Binet. Lee describes Benjamin as "a young bachelor named Li, who had arrived in the summer soon after the Binets and who taught Latin and mathematics. He was a Chinese from Hong Kong but had studied classics at the university in Manchester. He held a British passport" (2010, 179). His "Chinese name was Ping-Wo but everyone called him Benjamin, the name he'd chosen for himself while studying in England, after Disraeli" (187). Benjamin enthralls Sylvie from the moment he arrives, and I was also drawn to him with the force of a magnet.

There are many causes of identification.[3] Elsewhere in this special issue Catherine Conybeare discusses her identification with Dhuoda, the author of the *Liber Manualis*, musing: "It is that sense of motherhood as loss that binds me so deeply to Dhuoda—or perhaps, not so much 'motherhood as loss' but rather a relationship with one's children as if they were phantom limbs" (Conybeare 2023, 135). I identified with Benjamin's plight as a visibly racialized student and teacher of Classics. I knew of no other instance of a fictional character who was Asian and able to read ancient Greek or Latin. I was a graduate student at the time, so Benjamin and I were roughly the same age. I was beginning to teach, and those initial experiences in the classroom created a feeling of allegiance with Benjamin. I recognized the awkwardness of his transition from student to teacher, since I was managing the same transition. Lee emphasizes Benjamin's boyish appearance, noting, from Sylvie's perspective, "He was not much taller than she and although several years removed from university he could easily be mistaken for a high schooler, with his lithe, smooth-skinned build" (2010, 185). I similarly wondered whether the undergraduates in my sections viewed me more as an instructor or a peer. The corre-

2. A Google search confirmed that Ilion is the name of a village in Herkimer County, which is centrally located in New York state.

3. Felski 2019, 93–112 distinguishes four strands of identification: alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy.

spondence in our experiences made me empathize with Benjamin and want to learn even more about him.

Race was a complicating factor for both of us. Benjamin would have faced blatant racism as a foreign student studying Classics in England during the early decades of the twentieth century. I remember being a graduate student and hearing one of my professors speak in generalizations about the sort of writing that we should expect from our Asian undergraduates. The suggestion was that the argumentation would be less rational than that of the other students. I thought to myself, is this what you expect from me? Kate Brassel describes the unfortunate tendency of AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) students in classical studies "to efface who they are, a response tacitly required by the current white-centered norms of academic practices, in which little space is made for non-European cultural knowledge. Under the current regime, students are saddled with the grief of self-negation, which affects their emotional well-being and academic performance" (Brassel 2022).[4] Focalizing through Sylvie, Lee explains that Benjamin "had a lovely English accent and when he asked her during their private Latin lesson to translate a passage from the *Gallic Wars*, he would address her as *Miss Binet*, like some proper suitor in a novel" (2010, 185). Benjamin's careful performance of Britishness masks the challenges of assimilation. I interpreted his British accent and flawless mimicry of English as tools necessary to survive in a hostile environment.

I have sometimes wondered to what extent whiteness drew me to the study of Classics.[5] Stephanie Wong reflects (2019):

> Growing up, I resented my Asianness so much that I refused to explore my background and instead excelled in subjects I thought only white people were good at, like reading and writing. When it came time for me to pick a major as an undergraduate and a postgraduate path later on, it seemed natural to lean into what I had always been good at: reading, writing, and acting white. Classics was the perfect fit.

4. Chae 2018 explores the "epistemic injustice" suffered by minority students in Classics, pointing to the common experience of "white classicists thinking that they know more than classicists of color because 'they look the part' and we don't." Pandey 2018, recalling her experience as a student at Oxford, describes how "a famous don went out of his way to make me unwelcome in those hallowed halls."

5. I was particularly drawn to the privileges afforded by whiteness. The status of Asian Americans waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century based on our triangulated position relative to white and Black Americans. Kim 1999, 114 notes, "Chinese and other Asian immigrants fought the bar on naturalization by arguing that they were in fact White and thus eligible for citizenship. This strategy seemed efficient given their triangulated position and the persistent bundling of important privileges with Whiteness."

I also derived a troubling satisfaction from excelling my white classmates at the translation of ancient Greek and Latin texts. I almost sensed that by internalizing the grammars of these European languages I was internalizing the very grammar of whiteness. I eventually learned that Basil Gildersleeve, one of my favorite scholars, had fought for the Confederacy in the American Civil War. This revelation reminded me that the field of Classics had been founded by people willing to sacrifice their lives for whiteness. At one point Benjamin gives Sylvie a medal that he won as a high school student for distinction in classical languages, explaining, "It's an academic medal, from my high school days. Though it was a military academy. For some reason they gave these out—to make our accomplishments seem heroic, I guess. They gave great big medals for athletics and martial exercises, but I am afraid this one is merely for Greek and Latin. I want you to have it" (Lee 2010, 207–208). Benjamin downplays the importance of his accomplishment, but the fact that he has held onto this medal belies his modesty. He gives the medal to Sylvie because he is proud of his Western education. Benjamin's ability to instruct Sylvie in the venerated secrets of whiteness speaks to his own mastery of this ancient knowledge.

Identification generates certain avenues of interpretation and occludes others. Lee narrates in the third person, employing an internal focalization that presents events from Sylvie's perspective. We read about her travels with her missionary parents, the exhilaration that Benjamin's presence provokes, and the anguish with which she considers the possibility of having to leave Manchuria and, consequently, Benjamin. My fascination with Benjamin made me read against the grain of focalization, warping my perception of the surrounding novel. I remember feeling frustrated by the narrow focus on Sylvie. Eager to know what Benjamin was thinking, I could not help kicking against the narratological constraints of the novel. Felski, citing Nussbaum 2014, refers to "bad fans," "who fail to honor a work's intent, whether willfully or unknowingly" (2019, 95). I was not necessarily a 'bad fan,' but I had an agenda. I recognized that Lee was framing events from Sylvie's perspective, but I kept searching for a moment in which this focalization might break down, allowing Benjamin to intervene.

I viewed Benjamin as the Odysseus of *The Surrendered*. Lee's nuanced engagement with the mythological tradition remakes twentieth-century conflicts in East Asia in the image of the Trojan War and its aftermath.[6] Benjamin's rapport with Sylvie echoes that between Odysseus and Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*. Lee observes that "she was infatuated, and had been practically from the moment he arrived"

6. Kim 2020, 159 notes the novel's "evocation of a vast temporality that makes contemporary conflicts part of a historical continuum that begins with the Trojan War."

(2010, 185). Nausicaa explains her fervent desire to marry Odysseus in the sixth book of the epic poem (6.240–245):

> οὐ πάντων ἀέκητι θεῶν, οἳ Ὄλυμπον ἔχουσι,
> Φαιήκεσσ' ὅδ' ἀνὴρ ἐπιμείξεται ἀντιθέοισι·
> πρόσθεν μὲν γὰρ δή μοι ἀεικέλιος δέατ' εἶναι,
> νῦν δὲ θεοῖσιν ἔοικε, τοὶ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσιν.
> αἴ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τοιόσδε πόσις κεκλημένος εἴη
> ἐνθάδε ναιετάων, καί οἱ ἄδοι αὐτόθι μίμνειν.
>
> Not against the will of all the gods, who hold Olympus, has this man come among the godlike Phaeacians. For he previously seemed to me to be unseemly, but now he is like the gods, who hold broad heaven. Would that such a man be called my husband, dwelling here, and would that it please him to remain here.[7]

Sylvie similarly hopes that she and her parents will remain in Manchuria, since "the prospect of never seeing him again made her nauseous with grief" (Lee 2010, 189). Odysseus's arrival in Scheria coincides with an increase in the vividness of our identification with him, because he becomes the first-person narrator from books 9–12, recounting the dramatic tale of his travels following the sack of Troy. Perhaps my reading of the *Odyssey* had conditioned me to expect a similar prioritization of the perspective of this Odysseus, because I remember wondering whether Lee would finally begin to focalize through Benjamin. He seemed like a character whose perspective would shape my understanding of the narrative.

A sexual encounter between Benjamin and Sylvie changed my view of Benjamin, warning that the novel might be avoiding his perspective purposefully. Lee recounts this fumbling incident in substantial detail (2010, 188–189):

> She rushed up and embraced him, reaching with both arms inside his unbuttoned topcoat. He didn't move, but he didn't push away, either; and when her hands slipped down below the line of his belt and onto his flanks he didn't protest, his body tensing under her hands. She craned her face to try to meet his but he wouldn't look at her and kept his eyes shut, and not knowing what else to do she gripped more tightly at his thighs, at his backside; she felt like an obtuse child trying to figure a puzzle or a lock, fraught with a dizzying conflation of ignorance and desire and self-rage. But suddenly he pressed her close with an almost frightening force and beneath his gabardine trousers something

7. All translations are my own.

> rose up against her hip and seemingly without volition her hand met it, instantly understanding the necessary meter that became its own reason and only ceased with his momentary, almost pained, shuddering. All the while she was peppering his neck with kisses but he turned her away without even looking at her and struggled off, muttering only *good night*.

My rosy perception of Benjamin dissipated in this moment. I was disgusted by his decision to engage in sexual behavior with a teenage student, although my identification with him persisted. Felski observes that "to be like a character is not synonymous with *liking* a character: a felt affinity can be underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects" (2019, 79). Benjamin mirrored crucial facets of my identity, but I noticed something sour in the reflection that appeared. Lee's description of his bodily comportment, how "he wouldn't look at her and kept his eyes shut," communicates a mixture of shame and resolution. The comparison of Sylvie to "an obtuse child trying to figure a puzzle or lock" mirrored my own frustration in attempting to access Benjamin's interiority. I fixated upon the image of "a lock," realizing that we lock up things that we want to hide. I began to wonder whether the novel was withholding Benjamin's perspective for a reason.

I soon realized why *The Surrendered* refuses to grant access to Benjamin's interiority. He is hiding a dangerous secret. Some historical context might be helpful. Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo. Chinese forces, representing both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), had engaged in intermittent hostilities with the occupying Japanese.[8] On Lunar New Year's Day 1934, several Japanese soldiers arrive at the missionary school and interrogate the men working there. A Japanese officer had been killed the previous week in nearby Changchung. Benjamin's interrogation lasts longer than expected, and the other men begin to wonder whether he might have participated in the killing. I experienced a peculiar combination of curiosity and dread. I needed to know what would happen to Benjamin, but I was also terrified to discover his fate. I felt like Pentheus sneaking into the woods to observe the bacchants, the pages seemingly turning on their own. Lee's description of Benjamin's condition when he returns with the Japanese soldiers is horrifying (2010, 213):

> His hands were tied behind his back. He seemed only half conscious, barely

8. The KMT was founded as a nationalist political party on the Chinese mainland in 1919, ruling the Republic of China for multiple decades before losing the Chinese Civil War to the CCP in 1949. The KMT subsequently relocated to Taiwan, retaining its authoritarian rule over the island until the democratization of Taiwan in the 1990s. The KMT remains a prominent political party in Taiwan.

> able to stay kneeling as he shivered with cold. He had been badly beaten, his shoulders and neck lashed with welts. Small angry pocks peppered his chest: he'd been burned with cigarettes. His face was gruesomely battered, one eye swollen completely shut. Blood had flowed and congealed in a branching stream from a gash in his head. He could not, or would not, look up.

This passage must provoke a range of physical responses in readers. I remember rubbing my knees in sympathy with Benjamin.[9] I have never been the victim of torture, but I could imagine kneeling for hours, my ligaments and kneecaps aflame from the stress of an unforgiving floor. I felt physically and emotionally exhausted, but I forced myself to keep reading. One of the Japanese officers reports, "He is not a British subject at all but a Kuomintang agent" (Lee 2010, 214). When I first read these words, I assumed that the officer was lying. I did not want to believe that Benjamin would risk the lives of everyone else at the missionary school, but I was wrong.

My conception of Benjamin Li as Odysseus evolved as I processed this sequence of events. Benjamin came to resemble the Odysseus from Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. The Sophoclean Odysseus embodies the *Realpolitik* of the late fifth-century Athens in which the tragedy was originally performed.[10] Sophocles produced Philoctetes during the final decade of the Peloponnesian War in 409 BCE, and Odysseus reflects the cynical perspective of a tragedian who had witnessed the destruction of the Sicilian expedition and the temporary transformation of the Athenian democracy into an oligarchy ruled by the Four Hundred. Odysseus demonstrates this cynicism when he attempts to persuade Neoptolemus that he should take Philoctetes' bow by lying to him. He explains (54–65):

> τὴν Φιλοκτήτου σε δεῖ
> ψυχὴν ὅπως λόγοισιν ἐκκλέψεις λέγων,
> ὅταν σ' ἐρωτᾷ τίς τε καὶ πόθεν πάρει,
> λέγειν Ἀχιλλέως παῖς· τόδ' οὐχὶ κλεπτέον·
> πλεῖς δ' ὡς πρὸς οἶκον, ἐκλιπὼν τὸ ναυτικὸν
> στράτευμ' Ἀχαιῶν, ἔχθος ἐχθήρας μέγα,

9. Scholarship in various fields has discussed the body's involuntary responses to the depiction in text or image of other bodies interacting with diverse stimuli. Foster 2010 discusses the kinesthetic empathy experienced by the viewer of a dancing body. Olsen 2017, 155 applies this idea of kinesthetic empathy to antiquity, examining the possibility "that early Greek thought consistently constructs kinesthetic empathy as a product of visual perception combined with kinetic and somatic memory." Cf. Williams 1989, who explores the somatic responses provoked by hardcore pornography.

10. See Schein 2013, 20–23.

οἵ σ' ἐν λιταῖς στείλαντες ἐξ οἴκων μολεῖν,
μόνην γ' ἔχοντες τήνδ' ἄλωσιν Ἰλίου,
οὐκ ἠξίωσαν τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὅπλων
ἐλθόντι δοῦναι κυρίως αἰτουμένῳ,
ἀλλ' αὖτ' Ὀδυσσεῖ παρέδοσαν, λέγων ὅσ' ἂν
θέλῃς καθ' ἡμῶν ἔσχατ' ἐσχάτων κακά·

You must secretly deceive Philoctetes' mind with words, speaking to him. When he asks who you are and where you're from, say that you're the son of Achilles. You don't have to lie about this. Tell him that you're sailing home and you've abandoned the navy of the Achaeans, since you utterly despise them. They're the ones who summoned you with entreaties to come from home, because they had no other way to sack Ilion, but they declined to give you Achilles' armor, although you had rightfully demanded it when you came. They gave it to Odysseus instead. You should say what you want against me, even the foulest of foul insults.

Odysseus suggests that Neoptolemus should fabricate a disagreement with the other Greeks concerning his father's armor. He even offers himself up for disparagement to make the lie more realistic. Odysseus advises Neoptolemus to mix truth and fiction, to embellish his real identity with lies suited to the occasion. This approach represents a divergence from the Homeric Odysseus, who tends to invent entirely new identities. He famously presents himself, for instance, as a traveler from Crete. The Sophoclean Odysseus, or at least his philosophy, mirrors Benjamin Li, who claims to be a British citizen. His ability to instruct Sylvie in fluent English makes the lie believable, and Lee's decision to narrate these chapters from Sylvie's perspective cleverly conceals the truth of Benjamin's identity from the reader. We receive the same information that she does. The novel never clarifies how much of what we initially learn about Benjamin is true. He might have traveled from Hong Kong to England to Manchuria, as he claims, but this could also be a lie.[11] I recognized that I should take nothing about him for granted. I had identified with a character whose identity was premised upon a fundamental instability.

The culmination of this episode left me in tatters. Benjamin refuses to provide the names of his comrades, and the soldiers direct their violence at the Binets, hoping that he will try to protect them by offering information. Lee's description of what follows has been etched in my mind since I first read *The Surrendered*: "On

11. The scholarship on *The Surrendered* reflects this uncertainty about Benjamin's identity. Kim 2020, 162 refers to Benjamin as "a Communist agent," although the Japanese officer reveals that he is an agent of the Kuomintang.

the officer's command one of the soldiers dragged Benjamin to Jane as she was held down by the others and shoved him on her, making him kiss her on the mouth and the neck and the belly and down below. Then they forced them to copulate" (2010, 236–237). I have a visceral memory of recoiling from the page as though it were suddenly electrified. I had been betrayed by my own attraction to and identification with Benjamin. When Francis Binet intervenes, one of the soldiers stabs him with a bayonet, and he dies from his wound. Jane tries to take the officer's gun, but he shoots her. The soldiers finally turn their attention to Sylvie. They cut away Benjamin's eyelids, forcing him to watch as she is about to be raped. Lee reports that "It was then that Benjamin began screaming again. He was screaming bloody murder, all the names of his compatriots, screaming them in a litany, most loudly his own" (2010, 239).[12] I have never had a more wrenching reading experience. I felt complicit in Benjamin's violence. I had followed him this whole way, wincing at various points, but I could not help searching for his perspective, his interiority, and I had learned something in the process. Sylvie remains hopeful until the commencement of the carnage, believing that "he must finally see now that there was no other way, he had witnessed the vile consequences and would relent, tell the officer whatever he wished to know" (2010, 235). I, however, sensed that the officer had evaluated Benjamin correctly with the assertion, "He is not so special. You should know that he would do the same to me, if I were in his place. He would do the same to any of you" (2010, 215). Lee's description of the sexual encounter with Sylvie had alerted me to something unfeeling about Benjamin, but I had let my fascination with him carry me to this extreme point. I was disgusted that I had invested so much mental energy in Benjamin Li.

The closest thing that I had experienced to reading these chapters was the execution of the enslaved women at the end of book 22 of the *Odyssey*. The suitors have all been slaughtered at this point, and the old nurse Eurycleia informs Odysseus that some of the enslaved women who labor in the house have acted traitorously, disrespecting Penelope and sleeping with the suitors. Odysseus summons Telemachus and orders him to murder these women with a sword, but Telemachus comes up with his own method of execution. Homer narrates the awful sequence of events (22.465–473):

ὣς ἄρ᾽ ἔφη, καὶ πεῖσμα νεὸς κυανοπρῴροιο
κίονος ἐξάψας μεγάλης περίβαλλε θόλοιο,
ὑψόσ᾽ ἐπεντανύσας, μή τις ποσὶν οὖδας ἵκοιτο.
ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ἂν ἢ κίχλαι τανυσίπτεροι ἠὲ πέλειαι

12. Kim 2020, 163 notes that "the novel leaves unclear whether the soldiers' intended rape of her is carried out."

ἕρκει ἐνιπλήξωσι, τό θ' ἑστήκῃ ἐνὶ θάμνῳ,
αὖλιν ἐσιέμεναι, στυγερὸς δ' ὑπεδέξατο κοῖτος,
ὣς αἵ γ' ἐξείης κεφαλὰς ἔχον, ἀμφὶ δὲ πάσαις
δειρῇσι βρόχοι ἦσαν, ὅπως οἴκτιστα θάνοιεν.
ἤσπαιρον δὲ πόδεσσι μίνυνθά περ, οὔ τι μάλα δήν.

Thus he spoke, and having fastened the cable of a dark-prowed ship to a large pillar he threw it around the dome, stretching it aloft, so that none of the women might reach the floor with her feet. As when long-winged thrushes or doves fall into a snare that has been set in a thicket, taking themselves to their roost, and hateful is the bed that welcomes them, so did the women hold their heads in a row, and nooses were put around all of their necks, so that they might die most piteously. They struggled with their feet for a short time, but not for long.

This scene is contextualized very differently from the events in Manchuria. We spend several books eagerly awaiting the revelation of Odysseus's identity to the suitors, and I was thrilled to see him take his revenge when I first read the epic poem. I was already familiar with the contest of the bow and I soaked in the bloodshed, that is, until it was directed at these enslaved women.[13] This moment shamed me. I was horrified that I had rooted for someone capable of committing this violence and willing to indoctrinate his son into it. Benjamin struck me the same way. I questioned my own judgment and the impulses that had drawn me to him. Sylvie articulates Benjamin's appeal at one point, noting "this beauty that was disrupted beneath the surface veiling some errancy or even wreckage" (Lee 2010, 426). The notions of errancy and wreckage are equally relevant to Odysseus. The opening line of the *Odyssey* famously describes him as πολύτροπος, "much-wandering," and he survives multiple shipwrecks in returning to Ithaca. Benjamin arrives in Manchuria after traveling the world, but his account cannot be trusted. He ultimately proves to be an agent of death and destruction for those who enter his chaotic orbit.

I have periodically returned to these chapters like the scene of a crime, and I was eventually able to locate a fleeting moment in which *The Surrendered* focalizes through Benjamin. Lee records Sylvie's innocent beliefs, noting, "She was sure that inside she was much older than her years and that Benjamin Li was in fact younger than his, for despite his intelligence and learning he was evidently inexperienced as far as women were concerned (once Sylvie asked him if he had had a girlfriend at university and he blurted out to her, before he could think twice, that he'd *never*

13. See Atwood 2005 for a feminist response to the slaughter of these enslaved women.

had one)"(2010, 189). The parentheses reflect a slight shift in perspective here. The clause "before he could think twice" is unexpected, since Sylvie should have no awareness of Benjamin's thought process or lack thereof. We sneak a momentary peak into Benjamin's interiority as he lets down his guard. Benjamin Li is someone who *does* think twice before speaking. He is living a double life as a teacher and an insurgent after all. I had originally overlooked this moment as another awkward incident in the star-crossed romance between Benjamin and Sylvie, but I realized upon further reflection that the novel had left this hint at his duplicity hiding in plain sight. This passage even foreshadows the hideous result of Benjamin's interrogation. Sylvie proves to be his fatal weakness, somehow breaking down the defenses that protect his darkest secrets.

The Surrendered taught me that identification is dangerous. I was drawn to Benjamin Li because I saw something of myself in him. I recognized his plight as a racialized classicist, and, reading the novel for the first time as a graduate student, I longed for a sense of solidarity. Reading back through these chapters in the process of preparing this article, I still feel the attraction. Benjamin possesses a distinctive charisma that is difficult to ignore, and it certainly helps that Sylvie is so fascinated by him. I hoped that I would feel some distance as I read through the harrowing sequence of events this time, and I did, but I could not resist that familiar urge to seek after the hidden parts of him that the novel only unveils in due time. Perhaps it is impossible to unmoor oneself completely from a character like Benjamin or Odysseus. I know that Odysseus will order Telemachus to murder the enslaved women, but I cannot help relishing that first arrow that strikes Antinous in the throat (*Od.* 22.15). Reading is a sort of enchantment. It is impossible to predict the various allegiances and rivalries that we will experience as we make our way through a novel or an epic poem. We are sometimes drawn as readers to people who surprise us. Identification is a little bit like love in this way. We risk betrayal with each turn of the page.

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