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THE TATTOOS OF EPIMENIDES

The poetry of Sappho is rhizomically connected to Vedic hymns to the goddess of the dawn, and to the verse forms of the earliest Indian epics. As we have seen in the last chapter, her fragmentary and broken corpus of poems has many links with Egypt: Sappho's brother was said to have traveled to Egypt, and her poetry was copied and buried with the mummies of ancient Egypt, reborn in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century discoveries of tombs, mummies, and papyrus, which animated an intense erotic cathexis, as in the performance art of Colette.¹ The utopian aspects of Sappho's lyrics, her setting aside of a lyric world defined by female intimacies, the presence of Aphrodite, song and worship, created a heterotopia within the intensely engaged political struggles of archaic Lesbos. There is a magical, incantatory aspect to some of Sappho's poems that connects it as well with the powerful figures of the archaic world who, through a special wisdom, could move between the world of the living and that of the dead, who had special access to knowledge of the past and future, and who were enlisted into the service of the city of the archaic age.² These characters, among them Epimenides of Crete, who may have seemed freakish even to ancient people, shared attributes with wise men of other civilizations, especially Mesopotamia and India.

I am especially interested in this chapter in the stranger, in the slippage between the abnormal and the unnatural, and in people who deliberately set themselves outside the norm, choose to be abnormal, in order to become unnatural, especially in the case of the magician or sage or shaman, to be unnatural in their conquest of death, who travel, for example, outside of the norms of human existence, living outside the world, visiting the land of the dead, living immense life spans, returning themselves from death.³ This chapter concerns not just the norm and the abnormal, but rather characters

of legend, shamans or magicians, who stand as freaks of nature in the stories told of them.

In the nineteenth century, freaks were usually corporeal anomalies of the conjoined twin sort, but Rosemarie Garland-Thomson provides a list of the corporeal wonders characteristic of the American freak show of the last century, revealing the geographical range of strangeness, the ways the early American empire recruited exotic characters from distant places in a newly accessible world: "from wild men of Borneo to fat ladies, living skeletons, Fiji princes, albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, tattooed Circassians, armless and legless wonders, Chinese giants, cannibals, midget triplets, hermaphrodites, spotted boys, and much more."⁴ Some of these extraordinary bodies figure in the disturbing classic film *Freaks*, released in 1932. Of all Garland-Thomson's freaks, only the tattooed Circassian has, perhaps, made himself a freak; the others are born anomalous in color, shape, or body, extraordinary to look upon, or are seen as freakish only because they come from foreign lands. In the traveling freak shows, human beings were viewed with both fascination and disgust, wonder and horror; they were not admired for their special powers nor emulated by the possessors of ordinary bodies. And in some ways their bodies map a new imperial cartography, allowing access to once remote parts of an already globalizing modernity.

Leonard Cassuto provides a convincing historical argument concerning the role of these spectacles of pathos and difference from the 1840s to the 1940s:

Freak shows filled a gap that they did not create. This space, between the desire for absolute racial difference and the fact that none exists, was wide and deep in a culture that relied on such difference for its very organizing principles. The gap was occupied by fetishizing practices like blackface minstrelsy . . . and also by freak shows . . . Freak shows were a performance of one kind of imaginary difference in an effort to assert another.⁵

In the scientific atmosphere of the nineteenth century, when power and knowledge converged to produce the object of medicalized psychopathology and psychoanalysis, the abnormal dialectically produced a notion of the norm, which is deployed still in social science, even as postmodern theory—and queer theory in the hands of such thinkers as Judith Butler—have sought to call it into question.

In a series of lectures delivered at the College de France in 1974 and 1975, published under the title *Abnormal*, Michel Foucault discussed the

genealogy of our current conception of the norm.⁶ He traced a development over several centuries, from the early modern period to the present:

The “abnormal” individual that so many institutions, discourses and knowledges have been concerned with since the end of the nineteenth century derives from the juridico-natural exception of the monster, the multitude of incorrigible individuals caught in the apparatus of reification, and the universal secret of childhood sexuality. In fact, the three figures of the monster, the incorrigible, and the onanist do not merge. Each is inscribed within autonomous systems of scientific reference: the monster in a teratology and embryology . . . ; the incorrigible in a psychophysiology of sensations, motor functions, and abilities; the onanist in a theory of sexuality that is developed slowly starting from Kaan’s *Psychopathia sexualis*. (328)

Foucault’s category of the monster most closely resembles the strange power of the stranger, of the uncanny shamans of classical antiquity, although he is referring to individuals who are caught up in a developing legal system. The idea of the monster, he argues, is a juridical notion, since it “concerns the laws of nature as well as the laws of society” (323). Antiquity presents myriad monstrous creatures such as the centaur or the Amazon, some inherited from hybrid creations of Egypt or the ancient Near East and exemplifying not a juridical anomaly, but rather a fascination with borders, with those who live beyond the known limits of civilization, or who cross species border lines.

Our interest in the ab-normal may emerge dialectically from our position in the norm, in the regime of knowledge and power where we are trapped by ideas of norm, normalcy, normality. Foucault himself sees monsters, the abnormal, from this perspective, the monster as an individual who produces anxiety, who is a problem for the law, for bio-juridical power, who is an object of governmentality. What interests me most about such beings is not the horror associated with the abnormal, the unnatural, but rather the great power of the abnormal, the freakish, an aura of sacredness that inheres in the strangeness of the unnatural in antiquity. Jack Winkler, much concerned throughout his seminal book *The Constraints of Desire* with the category of the “unnatural,” analyzed the possibility that *unnatural* can be a term of praise.⁷ He wrote, “The word ‘unnatural’ in contexts of human behavior quite regularly means ‘seriously unconventional’ and is used like a Thin Ice to mark off territory where it is dangerous to venture” (17). He attributes the contrast between nature and convention, *phusis* and *nomos*, to the sophists of the fifth century B.C.E. and points to “isolated bits of moralizing texts” (18),

of the sort Foucault relied on for his *Use of Pleasures*, the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, as “unrepresentative” (18), giving a false idea of “Greek” ideas about pederasty, for example. In his anthropological enterprise, Winkler points to other sources, including Thucydides’ account of the women of Corcyra, who supported their husbands by tossing roof tiles onto the heads of enemy oligarchs: Their participation in the battle is called “unnatural,” *para phusin* (3.74). “In this case,” Winkler argues, “‘unnatural’ is a term of praise, as the wives transcend their socialized reticence and engage in open violence in support of their families’ interests” (20). Nature means convention, that is, culture.

Freak might be translated into Greek as *teras*, “monster,” or as *thauma*, “wonder” (related to *theaomai*, “gaze at with a sense of wonder”), the wonder that Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* says is the beginning of philosophy (1.2, 982b10–982b18).⁸ The pseudo-Aristotelian treatise “On Marvellous Things Heard” (*peri thaumasion akousmaton*), probably written by a later Peripatetic, sets out a wide spectrum of wonders, including a wild Paeonian beast called a *bolinthus*, which had a hide that when skinned covered the space of eight couches and which defended itself by “kicking and voiding excrement over a distance of forty feet . . . excrement which scorches so fiercely that it will scrape off a dog’s hair” (830a). In two accounts, or anecdotes, that connect the Aristotelian treatise with the magician and sage Epimenides, the text recounts the marvelous story of Demaratus, who fell ill, became dumb for ten days, and when recovered said that he had had the happiest time of his life (847a). The treatise contains another wondrous tale, of a man who fell asleep in a cave on the Aeolian island Lipara after drinking heavily, was found on the fourth day and taken for dead to his own tomb, but “after receiving all the usual rites he suddenly arose and told all that had happened to him” (839a).⁹

Two strands, delight in the unnatural, and the inhibiting conventionality of the natural, come together in this chapter on the magical freaks of antiquity, one of whom I propose to look at in some detail: Epimenides the “magician,” who breaches the boundary between the living and the dead, in an even wider extension of the ancient Greek world. We must first, however, acknowledge the problematic move of calling anyone a magician. In antiquity, and perhaps in the present as well, for many people magic is other people’s religion; magic can have the virtue of exoticism, the fascination of a distant thing, but sometimes the term *magic* is a semantic trap that colonizes, diminishes, trivializes the rituals of other,

often “primitive” people. In the present, there is often an implicit condescension from location in a western monotheism that disavows its own magical aspects. Some of the most interesting recent scholarship in classics focuses on the popular culture, archaeology, and rituals of so-called magic.¹⁰ From some perspectives, abnormally developed individuals of the human species, *thaumata*, are divine, masters of truth, or shamans rather than magicians. Yet to call them magicians is to set them in the ancient context, as *magoi*—that is, from the perspective of high culture, charlatans or sorcerers; from another perspective, persons of extraordinary gifts and powers.

Many features of the life of Epimenides, sometimes listed as one of the seven sages of archaic Greek antiquity, call attention to him as unnatural, abnormal, an adept at what were later identified as magical practices. He probably lived in the seventh century B.C.E., a Cretan of Knossos, with the unusual feature that he had Pythagorean long hair—“differing by the letting down of his hair . . . he did not look like a Cretan.”¹¹ In a biographical account relying on Theopompus, Phlegon of Tralles in *On Longevity*, and Xenophon of Colophon, Diogenes Laërtius sets out his strange career, a career that calls up not so much questions of the abnormal, although he certainly was that from the statistical perspective of modernity, but especially questions of the unnatural, in that Epimenides violated many of the natural rules governing human existence, defying death by returning after his long life to visit the mortal, decaying, human world again.

Diogenes tells the story of Epimenides’ youth: His father sent him into the countryside to search for a sheep. At noon he turned aside (*tes hodou ekklinas*) and went to sleep in a cave, where he slept for fifty-seven years (D.L. 1.109). Then he got up and went looking again for the sheep, which were not to be found, but Epimenides did not yet know that he had been asleep. This is, as E. R. Dodds notes in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, a common feature of folktales, but he adds that the Long Sleep at the beginning of the story of Epimenides “suggests that the Greeks had heard of the long ‘retreat’ which is the shaman’s novitiate and is sometimes largely spent in a condition of sleep or trance.”¹² According to another source, Epimenides, a master of truth, while in the cave on Mount Dikte conversed in a dream state with the gods and met *Aletheia* and *Dike*, “Truth” and “Justice” (Diels FVS7, 1, 32 17 ff).¹³

Epimenides, not finding the sheep, went back to his father’s farm and found someone else in possession of it. He found both country and city

utterly changed; going to the *astu*, the city, entering the house, he discovered people there who wanted to know who he was. Finally, he came upon his younger brother, who had become an old man, and learned *pasan ten aletheian*, "the whole truth." He was thereafter known by the Greeks as *theophilestatos*, "most dear to the gods." This epithet has several aspects. First of all, there is the weird and freakish fact of Epimenides, while preserving his own youth, sleeping just long enough to catch the end of his brother's life, therefore being out of sync with his own generation, his own natural life span, but still able to learn the truth from someone who was living a normal, natural life. Such a *décalage*, a time lag, is a standard feature of science fiction, in which people who engage in space travel or experience time warps come back to their previous reality and find everything changed. Then there is the fact that Epimenides, having fallen asleep and then reawakened, is seen as favored by the gods; this is in remarkable contrast with the account in Herodotus of the lives of young Biton and Cleobis, who, in answer to their mother's prayer, fell asleep in the temple of Hera, to which they had transported their mother, never to wake again. The anecdote, told in the context of Solon's visit to Croesus, reinforces the notion that those whom the gods love die young. Solon says, "The god used them to show that it is better for a person to be dead than to be alive." The goddess had given them "whatever it is best for a human being to have."¹⁴ Solon went on to stress the negative consequences of long life, even though he himself lived a long albeit natural life span: "Anyone who lives for a long time is bound to see and endure many things he would rather avoid" (1.32). Croesus notoriously failed to learn this important lesson. And Epimenides, freakishly, is said to be most beloved by the gods, even though his career so clearly defies the principles adduced by Solon. This is another strain then, contradicting the pessimism of the classical period, or perhaps an optimism surviving from an earlier age, or even a strand of the ideology of another class, the same populace that will later embrace the practices of magic flourishing beneath the surface of more official cult.

Because of his fame, the Athenians called on Epimenides when they were subdued by a plague and were advised by the Pythia at the Delphic oracle to purify the city. Nicias, son of Niceratus, went to Crete to request Epimenides' aid. Epimenides arrived in the forty-sixth Olympiad, that is, between 595 and 592 B.C.E., cleansed or purified (*ekatheren*) the city, and stopped the disease. His method curiously echoed the earlier story of his long sleep. He took sheep, the very beasts he had sought as a

boy near Knossos on Crete. This time there were many sheep, both black and white, the pure and the impure, the pure white animal the one ritually chosen for sacrifice. He brought the animals to the Areopagus, and let the animals wander where they pleased, "instructing those who followed them to mark the spot where each sheep lay down (*kataklimoi*) and offer a sacrifice to the local divinity" (1. 110). (*Kataklimoi* echoes *tes hodou ekklinas*: "He turned aside out of the way" of his earlier adventure in the cave [1. 109].) In this case a sacrifice was offered to the *prosekonti theo*, the "local divinity," the god belonging to the spot, perhaps Ares. This is intriguing in part because Epimenides himself, after lying down in his spot, the cave, perhaps the very Idaean or Dikteian cave in which the god Zeus was raised, was precisely not sacrificed, did not die, but spent his fifty-seven years asleep, in a pseudo-death, only to awaken and carry on as if nothing had happened.¹⁵

Epimenides' powers allowed him to work out the proper method of catharsis for Athens. If it was in fact Ares to whom the sacrifices were made, it seems appropriate for the sort of feud being carried out between rival aristocratic families in Athens.¹⁶ Epimenides, whose nature it was, according to Robert Parker, "to be wrapped in swathes of the fabulous,"¹⁷ put an end to the plague, caused by pollution following the murder of the followers of Cylon, the Athenian aristocrat and an Olympic victor, who had married the daughter of the tyrant of Megara and seemed to have schemed for the tyranny of Athens himself, when with others he seized the Acropolis in the Olympic year 632. Besieged, he escaped, but his friends, who surrendered and sought sanctuary at an altar or, according to Herodotus, at the base of the statue of Athena, were persuaded to quit the statue with assurances that they would be spared, were killed. A curse thereafter fell on the archon of the city, Megakles, and his family, the Alcmaeonids (for Megakles' son Alcmaeon; Alcibiades, favorite of Socrates, had an Alcmaeonid mother) (Herodotus 5.71, Thucydides 1.126). Perhaps the slaughter of both black and white sheep refers to a compensatory killing of two opposing sides in a struggle; the sacrifice of both sorts evens the score and mediates the difference that had produced the pestilence.

Diogenes Laërtius reported that Epimenides was said to have founded the temple in Athens dedicated to the Eumenides, which is suggestive given their transformation from vengeful furies to benign presences, and also to have been the first man ever to found temples. He was said to have purified houses and fields (*oikias kai agrou*). In his life of Epimenides,

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Plutarch, in his *Life of Solon*, recalls that the Athenians

sent for Epimenides the Phaestian from Crete, who is counted the seventh wise man by those who will not admit Periander into the number. He seems to have been thought a favourite of heaven, possessed of knowledge in all the supernatural and ritual parts of religion; and, therefore, the men of his age called him a new Curies, and son of a nymph named Balte. When he came to Athens, and grew acquainted with Solon, he served him in many instances, and prepared the way for his legislation. He made them moderate in their forms of worship, and abated their mourning by ordering some sacrifices presently after the funeral, and taking off those severe and barbarous ceremonies which the women usually practiced; but the greatest benefit was his purifying and sanctifying the city, by certain propitiatory and expiatory lustrations, and foundations of sacred buildings, by that means making them more submissive to justice, and more inclined to harmony.¹⁸

Plato's Clinias, in his conversation with "the Athenian" and the Spartan Megillus, as they walked from Knossos to the cave of Zeus, also recalled the visit of Epimenides to Athens, in the context of lawmaking, where Epimenides was seen as a precursor to the great lawgiver Solon:

Clinias: You have presumably heard of Epimenides, an inspired person born in this city [Knossos] and connected with my own family, who visited Athens ten years before the Persian Wars at the bidding of the oracle, and offered certain sacrifices enjoined by the god, besides telling the citizens, who were alarmed by the Persian preparations, that the enemy would not come within ten years, and when they did, would depart again with their purpose unaffected, after receiving more damage than they inflicted. That was when my family contracted their friendship with your countrymen, and my ancestors and myself have had a kindness for them ever since.¹⁹

This recollection of alliance serves as an invitation to the Athenian to expound on what was seen as the superiority of the Athenian laws, beginning with true education. Elsewhere Diogenes discusses the peculiar eating habits of Epimenides, which mark his kinship with other sages of the ancient world, with other civilizations; he was reported to receive special food from the nymphs, which he kept in a cow's hoof; he consumed this food, which was never excreted (*medemia kenousthai apokrisei*), and he was never seen to eat (114).

Thomas McEvelley, in his voluminous study of relationships between ancient India and ancient Greece, considers fully the possibility of "diffusion channels in the pre-Alexandrian period": "I will make a measured attempt to establish significant intrusions first from India to Greece in the pre-Socratic period, then from Greece back to India in the Hellenistic period."²⁰ He argues that "around 1500 to 1300 B.C. full East-West transport of goods—almost from one end of Eurasia to the other—was achieved. The final link was the appearance of the caravan emporia of Bactria . . . linking India, China, and Central Asia at one end with the Near East and the Mediterranean at the other" (4). Richard Martin, in an anthropological, cross-cultural essay on the myths associated with the Greeks' seven sages, points out in ancient India "an exact parallel in the ascetic activities attributed to the Seven Rsis, who fast and abstain."²¹

Evidence concerning the seven sages of the ancient Greeks, among whom Epimenides was sometimes though not always included, came to light in an important site of the late Hellenistic world:

It was only in October 1966 that French archaeologists discovered at Aikhanum in Afghanistan, site of an ancient Greco-Bactrian city, an important missing piece of the sages puzzle: a poetic inscription on a stele base which confirms that a list of 147 sayings of the Seven Sages, a list known up

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Plato but rather as old as Indo-European antiquity?" (122). Of course, such figures, as Martin himself acknowledges in his cross-cultural exploration of the wise man, exist in many sites in the ancient worlds. His emphasis on more local origins suggests a bounded, hermetic aspect of Indo-European scholarship that echoes that of some classical studies, yet it also points to the ever-increasing expansion of the borders of the classical.

The Greek tradition also associated Epimenides with writing. He was a poet as well as a purifier and cleanser of pollution. Diogenes lists several long poems, including one on the birth of the Curetes and the Corybantes, and another, a theogony, of five thousand verses. All these divinities suggest ecstatic or orgiastic dimensions to Epimenides' interests. He also wrote a poem about *Argo*, the first ship, and about Jason's voyage to Colchis, home of Medea, surrounded by the Caucasus Mountains. This might be taken to support E. R. Dodds' claim of Epimenides' associations with shamanism, brought to Greece in the seventh century through the opening of the Black Sea to trade and colonization (142). Epimenides' poetic topics and adventures ally him with the East and, as noted above, with the sages and wise men of ancient Mesopotamia and Vedic India.

Diogenes also lists prose works by Epimenides titled "Sacrifices and the Cretan Constitution" and "On Minos and Rhadamanthys" (the latter, Cretan rulers and brothers who served as judges of the dead). The poetic works figure elsewhere in his story.²⁶ Not long after purifying Athens of the Cylonian pollution, Epimenides is said to have died back in Crete—according to Phlegon, having lived 157 years; according to the Cretans, 299. Xenophon of Colophon said he heard that Epimenides lived 154 years; in any case, Epimenides' would have been an abnormal, unnatural life span.

What became of Epimenides after his death remains in some ways the strangest aspect of his long career. Diogenes reports that, according to Sosibius of Sparta, "The Lacedaemonians guard his body in their own keeping in obedience to a certain oracle" (D.L. Epimenides 115). This rather cryptic remark is elaborated upon in the *Suda*. Jesper Svenbro considers this feature of Epimenides' afterlife in *Phrasikleia*, his anthropology of reading in ancient Greece. The Spartans were beholden to Epimenides because he had prophesied the victory of the Arcadians over Sparta, so they were appropriate keepers of his body, or rather, perhaps, of his skin (*derma*), which was discovered after his death to be tattooed with letters (*grammasi katastikon*) (*Suda*, under "Epimenides").

The possibility of the separation of the tattooed skin from Epimenides' body is an intriguing one. The most famous occasion of the skinning of a

living being came with the defeat of the satyr Marsyas to Apollo in a kithara-playing contest, after which he was flayed alive, allegedly to be used as a wine skin. (According to Xenophon, the *askos*, the skin, could be visited in a cave at the source of a tributary of the Maeander River in Phrygia [*Anabasis* 1.2.8].) Svenbro insists that the word *derma* is used in the *Suda* merely because the word *soma* [body] has just been employed, thus for variation's sake: "Epimenides' *soma* would hardly have been stripped of its skin and thereby separated from it" (137, n. 76). But why should the skin, the surface of the body peeled from the corpse, not be exhibited detached from the body? Like parchment, the skin of animals on which texts were recorded, a more costly alternative than papyrus, the skin might be removed from the corruptible body and preserved, like the skin of Marsyas, or the skin Michelangelo painted as a self-portrait in the Sistine Chapel.²⁷ The Scythians, according to Herodotus, skinned their enemies killed in war: "Human skin, apparently, is thick and shiny-white—shinier, in fact, than any other kind of skin. They . . . often skin the whole of a corpse and stretch the skin on a wooden frame which they then carry around on their horses" (4.64). Epimenides' skin is especially portentous: the skin as the border between inside and outside, the garment in which the body is concealed, that part of the body that others see. Much of the strangeness of Epimenides resides in this tattooed skin, which connects him with the nineteenth-century freak show and its "tattooed Circassians," who came from the Caucasus Mountains at the eastern edge of the Black Sea.

Svenbro suggests that Epimenides—the sage, the wise man, the shaman, the magician—bore his own verses tattooed on his skin, like a scar, the record of a wound: "An ancient proverb alludes to his tattooed skin; according to the *Suda*, *epimenidein derma* 'Epimenidean skin,' was an expression used 'for secret things' (*epi ton apotheton*) . . . It is perfectly possible that Epimenides' *apotheta* are of a poetic nature, especially since this Cretan was himself a hexametric poet in the Hesiodic tradition" (137). It is as if—for those who encountered first the living body of Epimenides and then his skin, his pelt, after his death—the poems themselves, the verses themselves, emerged from inside the body to take up residence on the outside. The man was an embodiment of his poetry, his writing, marked from inside out, as if the words, turned into marks, emanated from him, through the skin, to remain on its surface. Svenbro's great interest in this feature of Epimenides' story concerns the anthropology of reading, the fact that Epimenides was inseparable from his writing,

his *grammata*, in “the fusion of writer with inscription” (140). After death, “his tattoos change his *soma* into a *sema*, in both senses of the latter word” (141); that is, it is both a sign and a tomb. For Svenbro, when a ancient reader, reading aloud, voices the signs of Epimenides’ body, he brings back the *psukhe*, the breath of Epimenides; just as when he was alive, the shaman could leave his body, taking his *psukhe* with him, and return to it at will. Epimenides’ corpse “resembles a stele that is inscribed” (143). Interestingly, Clearchus of Soli (in “On Sleep,” third century B.C.E.) reported that Epimenides was said to have rejoined the living after death. He added, laconically, “There is no need to go into detail” (F8 Wehrli).

Svenbro brilliantly shows how the letters inscribed on Epimenides’ body allow him life after death, many breaths, many *psukhai* reanimating his writing as they read his letters. This tattooing makes the free Epimenides abnormal in relation to other free men, since tattoos in antiquity were later usually associated with barbarians and slaves. Thracians wore tattoos; Athenian vases show Thracian women and the maenads who killed Orpheus with tattoos. Elsewhere in the *Anabasis*, Xenophon describes the Euxine tribe called the Mossynoeci and

some boys belonging to the wealthy class of people, who had been specially fattened up by being fed on boiled chestnuts. Their flesh was soft and very pale, and they were practically as broad as they were tall. Front and back were brightly coloured all over, tattooed with designs of flowers. These people wanted to have sexual intercourse in public with their mistresses, this being actually the normal thing in their country. Both men and women were pale skinned. Those who were on the expedition used to say that these people were the most barbarous and the furthest removed from Greek ways of all those with whom they came in contact. (5.4.32)²⁸

In the fifth century, captive Thebans were tattooed by their Persian enemies, and the Greeks may thereafter have associated tattooing with barbarism, as Xenophon does here, and with punishment. Barbarians were not always allies, as in this passage, but were often captured and enslaved, their bodies covered with tattoos; other slaves were tattooed or branded with marks of possession or as punishment for disobedience or for attempting to run away from their masters.²⁹ In a description that suggests that inferior status, barbarity, or even slavery may be traced to a genealogical repetition, Aristotle reports a strange occurrence in his *Generation of Animals*:

Children are born which resemble their parents in respect not only of congenital characteristics but also of acquired ones; for instance, there have been cases of children which have had the outline of a scar in the same places where their parents had scars, and there was a case at Chalcedon of a man who was branded on his arm, and the same letter, though somewhat confused and indistinct, appeared marked on his child.³⁰

One of the most intriguing accounts of tattooing, related to Aristotle's suggestion that tattooing could be passed from one generation to the next, even among slaves by nature, is recounted by Diogenes in his life of Bion of Borysthenes (third century B.C.E.). When asked who he was, Bion replied, "My father was a freedman, who wiped his nothing on his sleeve"—meaning that he was a dealer in salt fish—"a native of Borysthenes, with no face to show, but only the writing on his face [*suggraphen epi tou prosopou*], a token of his master's severity" (4.46). Bion's father married a woman from a brothel, and such tattoos were associated with barbarism, slavery, and criminality.

Although tattoos may not yet have had such associations in the archaic age, for later readers Epimenides' tattoos marked him as abnormal, even monstrous. He assumed the degraded condition of the marked man, the criminal, the slave, the temple possession; yet he stood not below other free men, but above them with his wisdom, his prophetic powers, his extraordinary long life and capacity to return among the living after death. Like that of other magicians, who became more prominent in later ages, his knowledge was written on his body. He was a freak, abnormal, unnatural, freakish in his powers and longevity and immortality, not normal, not natural, especially in his ability to escape death. A strong current in the stories told of the wise men who lived long lives—and, in the case of Epimenides and, later, Apollonius of Tyana, were revered as great magicians—is the drive for that most seductive of utopian possibilities, the quest for the unnatural status of immortality.

If we are in postmodernity concerned with "norms," fretting under them and obsessed with statistics, the average, the conventional, perhaps our interest in the abnormal, the superhero with superpowers, represents an emancipatory impulse, a desire to embrace abnormality. And if so, we must recognize the utopian dimension of the abnormal, of the queer, bizarre, transgressive, and subversive, often arriving from distant lands—in Epimenides' case, coming from Crete to Athens—but also having affinities with ancient sages from an earlier Indo-European age, from a Vedic

or a Mesopotamian prehistory. Rather than the abnormal to be institutionalized, pathologized, medicalized, psychoanalyzed, or euthanized, or the freak show as a racist performance piece, we find in the ancient figures of Epimenides and other shamans divinely marked persons whose abnormal, unnatural capacities freed them from constraints to which all other mortal beings are subject, who had extraordinary powers to move through time and space, echoed in the tattooed Circassians of the nineteenth-century freak show, and to survive through generations like the texts that record their histories.

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