Signs of Writing in Homer

Fixing the Text

To this point I have been describing a view of poetry inherited from a time when writing was unknown, or, if known, had nothing to do with the profession of epic singing. In a sense I have been looking past or behind the texts for the theory of poetry that was formed to preside over their evolution. Inasmuch as this idea of poetry, like its concomitant modes of oral composition, was hallowed by tradition and proved by success, it was carried over into the texts of the poems when they were written down. Yet they were indeed written down; at some point in the archaic period the oral art of epic issued in at least two monumental compositions, which have become the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In this chapter I shift my perspective to this moment, difficult though it may be to fix chronologically, and consider how writing may have affected the singer’s idea of what he was doing. If the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are manifestly products of an oral art interacting with writing, it may be that they bear some trace of the poet’s attitude to this new art. If we imagine the first contributors to fixed texts, as I think we must, as still capable of the oral improvisational style, it is possible that the poems they composed for inscription bear some reference to or reflect upon this new device for preserving fame. It is at least clear
that Homer refers to writing, apparently alphabetic writing, once in the epics. And the word he uses for it—sêmata, “signs”—can be a signpost for us in thinking of how writing would be accommodated in his world. If we look at writing as one among the many other fixing and fixed signs in Homer, we may read a lesson on its powers and weaknesses. In particular, those “signs” that are monuments to heroic action may suggest one answer to how the poetry met this technology and its peculiar powers. I turn, then, in this chapter away from the traditional ideas of poetry embedded in the texts and try to read, as it were, their topmost layer to discover the poet’s relationship to his text.

If we think of Homer as the “great master” at the end of the tradition who fixed the poems, by definition he had come across the fact of alphabetic writing.\(^1\) Inscriptions show that the Greeks had adapted a Semitic script to their language already by the second half of the eighth century B.C.E., and no one would put monumental composition much earlier.\(^2\) In fact the writing referred to in the poems seems to be a reflection of contemporary writing rather than a traditional reference to some earlier Aegean script. In a version of the Potiphar’s wife story attached to the name of Bellerophon, Proteus sends him away to Lycia to be done away with by one of his guest-friends. Toward this end he gives the unwitting Bellerophon a closed diptych tablet on which are inscribed “baleful signs . . . soul-destroying, many of them” ([Il. 6.168–170, 176–178]). The passage has been explained away as a dim memory of Mycenean script or a reference to some primitive system of signing, tokens, or pictograms; yet recent finds from the Near East convincingly suggest that the writing here is oriental writing, as are the motifs and geography of the story.\(^3\)

By the time the Iliad was composed, then, alphabetic writing was known in Greece. The still-open question is how widespread the new technology was and whether it would have been used to record an epic poem. Not a few Homerists have assumed or argued

\(^1\) Webster (1964) 226–227.
\(^2\) Heubeck (1979).
that Homer seized on the (relatively new?) invention near this early date and wrote himself.\(^4\) But Albert Lord, on the basis of fieldwork in Yugoslavia, held that writing destroys the compositional powers of an oral poet: he was willing to allow only that the poet might have dictated his poems.\(^5\) Lord’s claim about the mutual hostility of orality and literacy is now seen as too sweeping.\(^6\) Nevertheless, others have been troubled that, though the earliest inscriptions include many snatches of verse, there is no proof that the new technology was used so early for creating monumental public documents.\(^7\) Even if we allow for the possibility that we may have lost a great deal of writing on perishable materials, it is not easy to imagine why such enormous texts would have been produced for a still largely illiterate age in which they would have been rarely read and nearly impossible to perform in toto. Hence, G. S. Kirk hypothesized that the poems were fixed in their oral stage and transmitted by memorizing rhapsodes until it was easier and more obviously useful to write them down.\(^8\)

What remains constant in this variety of views is that, however late or early the scenario, an oral poet confronted writing, in the sense that he took the step of putting his fluent art into a single fixed and lasting form. The point was made in Adam Parry’s perceptive review of the question. Allowing that Lord’s suggestion of a dictating oral poet is not to be ruled out, he noted, “If the man who, on this hypothesis, put the poems into writing was more an amanuensis than a recording scholar in the manner of Parry and Lord, then the difference between this sort of dictation and actually writing by hand would not be enormous. . . . It follows that the name ‘Homer,’ if by this we mean the author of the our poem,


\(^6\)Finnegan has argued (1977) 160–169 that writing and “oral” techniques of composition may at times interact.

\(^7\)See Coldstream (1977) 307–311 on the earliest uses of writing in Greece and Heubeck (1979) 151–152 for the possibility that we have lost much that was written on perishable materials.

\(^8\)Kirk (1962) 208–17, who observes, “The evidence is still too slight for anyone, however judicious, to settle once and for all these detailed problems of how the poems were composed and transmitted.”
must be reserved for the poet who composed the *Iliad* at the time when it was put into writing.” In all scenarios we must posit as one step a confrontation between the traditional oral poet and this new technology. Even in Kirk’s scenario, which Parry rightly characterizes as uneconomical and unlikely, a song that had been sung in many ways at many times is at some point reduced to a fixed version in the mind of the poet.

The effects of the simple fact of writing on the idea and nature of poetry may no doubt be great. The works of Havelock and Ong aim to show that writing is not just a neutral technology but may effect a transformation of consciousness and create a new relationship between speaker and what is spoken; and no one living in the computer age will doubt that what may appear to be a mere refinement in information storage can have profound implications for art and thought. But it is also clear that revolutionary effects need not be instantaneous: this new way of transmitting poetry need not have immediately transformed the singer’s conception of his art, and as I have said, his representations of his art are determinedly oral. Yet even in the earliest imaginable moment of the meeting between song and stylus, there was surely a radical transaction. It is easy to imagine that the prospect of a written poem could reconfigure the poet’s relation to his art: because of writing, what had been a fluid performance may become a fixed and visible object; what had been the gift of the Muses can be owned, hidden away, referred to, and revised. At least potentially, writing makes it possible for the singer to become the maker of an artifact and for the song to become a finished text. The question for Homer is whether these new attitudes might have already begun to emerge in some form at the times the poems were written down.

The very old question of whether Homer could write is rarely raised in this form but usually asked in behalf of the text. If it was written, we might expect subtleties and a well-conceived general

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9Parry (1966) 297.

10Kirk’s position is nuanced in Miller (1982), citing also Notopoulos (1951) and Hainsworth (1970). Miller hypothesizes that, even if unwritten, an excellent performance may have been regarded as a “final version” in its macrostructure. But as he is forced to allow for “various local expansions, contractions, and other artistic and audience-specific modifications,” it is hard to imagine any real function for the “final” text of such a necessarily adaptive structure.
scheme; if it was orally composed we need not resolve every inconsistency and apparent fault into a literary stratagem. But it can also be asked in behalf of the poet: What was it for a poet descended from an oral tradition to meet writing? Would he have immediately perceived and embraced its potential to fix his songs in a stable and enduring form? It is worth wondering whether the poet’s attitudes toward this new way of preserving his art were exactly what we would suppose.

To literate readers and antiquarian scholars the advantages to a poet in writing down his text are clear: one has captured the best performance and is not likely to do as well ever again; one gets it right because it can be gone over and revised; perhaps too, one can make something more monumental and massive than had ever been possible before. Moreover, with writing the singer has not simply an ability but a precious object: it can be dedicated at a God’s shrine or passed down as a sort of heirloom. Finally, writing offers a new way for the singer to aspire to poetic immortality: his texts, his own words, will be repeated as his through time. Often without thinking we assume that Homer would have ended his dictation or writing with the same feeling as Horace, when he penned the epilogue to three books of odes: “Exegi monumentum aere perennius” (“I have brought to completion a monument more lasting than bronze”). Yet I do not see much trace of such an attitude in Homer, and indeed, one Horatian scholar (and early contributor to the Homeric question) seems to me rightly to repudiate such comforting intuitions. When Richard Bentley read that Homer had “designed his poem for eternity, to please and instruct mankind,” he responded quite bluntly: “Take my word for it, poor Homer, in those circumstances and early times, had never such aspiring thoughts. He wrote a sequel of songs and rhapsodies, to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer, at festivals and other days of merriment. . . . Nor is there one word in Homer that presages or promises immortality to his work; as we find there is in the later poets, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Statius. He no more thought, at that time, that his poems would be immortal, than our free-thinkers now believe their souls will; and the proof of each will be only a parte post; in the event, but not in the expectation.”

11In the Dyce edition (1938) 3.304 (originally published 1713.)
We are not as sure as Bentley was just when and how the poems were written down, but his point about the difference in artistic posture between Homer and these later, fully literate poets is well taken. Even if we allow that Homer might have chosen to be silent about his text’s immortality, a portrait of him as literary artist presupposes a rather sudden rise of literary values and virtues in the eighth century. To assume that the availability of writing would have automatically brought with it expectations of Horatian perfection and enduringness may be a no less apocalyptic fantasy than the notion of a “literate revolution” in which the technology of the alphabet instantaneously transformed thought and speech. Certainly the historical evidence suggests that authorship and fixity were slow to come to the epic genre as a whole.

Apart from the problem of anachronistically making the monumental poet a wholly literary type, it must be borne in mind that, for all its powers and promises, writing would have been antithetical to the oral singer’s art in real ways, if less extremely so than Lord suggested. “Verbal variability and originality in oral performance are extremely common, and almost certainly more typical than an unchanging transmission,” says Finnegan, and this is not simply a primitive aspect of the art but one of its virtues. One can imagine some practical disadvantages in adhering to a written text for a poet who had been doing very well relying on the Muses: once fixed, a song is inflexible, unadaptable to the moods of the audience, the proprieties of the place and time. Poets who had long been able to produce songs appropriate to given occasions hand this ability over to a device that makes the songs rather stiff and no longer subject to their personal control. Again, circulation becomes far more limited than it had been for an able-bodied poet: very few of the crowd in the agora would have wanted to read such a thing, and his noble patrons would no doubt have preferred seeing the bard come into their halls to hearing his poem from a scribe. Even if we suppose that the poems were first written only for poets, as a reference and reminder (this for devotees of the Muse!), still, under ordinary circumstances they were too long to be performed in toto, so that their monumental structure might become apparent. The

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poets, then, who handed over their Iliads and Odysseys to alphabets may have had more complex attitudes than may appear. This new device for capturing fame need not have been wholly welcomed any more than photography, for example, is always thought a benign marvel when seen for the first time. After all, the only writing Homer does refer to is called “soul-destroying” and is the secret, folded-up writing of a tyrant; it is the opposite of publication.

The idea of fixing the text is what interests me in this chapter: whether the Homeric texts reflect any tension between the idea that a text is in perfectly fixed shape and the sense that it has become fixated and lost its motion and ability to change. To explore this attitude, if it is accessible, is to look at the sēmata, “signs,” the texts speak of, for in calling writing “signs” Homer seems to have made a deliberate choice: he does not use the regular word for “writing” in later Greek, grammata, though he uses its parent verb graphein, “to scratch,” for the act of writing in this same passage. Rephrasing writing as “signs” may be a means of disguising contemporary technology under terms and processes traditionally found in the idealized, archaized world of heroes. In any case, in choosing the word sēma Homer has aligned writing with many other “signs” in the poems, a large array of physical objects with varying signifying functions. Indeed, Homer’s heaven and earth are full of signs, which the heroes, together with all the ranks of priests, prophets, and soothsayers, try mightily to understand. There are signs in the regularities of nature, as in the crane’s cry or the dog star’s rising; there are signs in exceptional or fortuitous events, such as flashes of lightning or the flight of birds; and prodigies of nature are inevitably portentous. The order that governs the world, that is to say, the mind of Zeus, is proverbially inscrutable; but anything in the world that rises to strike the eye or mind may be a sign of a meaning beyond it.

Homer’s heroes live among man-made signs too. In particular we are directed to understand the function of writing in relation to the signs or tombs of warriors, which promise kleos. As these signs

13So Heubeck (1979) 140 and Jeffery (1962) 555, though the latter allows for the possibility that the word may be an unconscious Greek repetition of a detail in the Lycian tale.
are a visible, tangible, and artificial way of preserving *kleos*, their operations and qualities may parallel those of written epic poems. Writing itself may have been of little interest to Homer; he may have scarcely known it or hardly appreciated its consequences. But writing was to be given the same powers over his art as the sign had been given within the oral tradition, so that in thinking about signs Homer and the tradition were already thinking about those aspects of writing that concern us. In this chapter, then, as a way into the question of the oral poet and his relation to any art work, I consider not the art of writing, or even the arts in general, but signs, as concrete and efficient objects, how these actual signs behave and how they are related to the singer's project. In fact, the stories Homer tells about signs seem concerned with their power to preserve fame and seem to know that it is something like the power of epic. Indeed there are in each epic monumentally constructed signs to spread fame far in space and time which seem to intimate our idea of the text as a “monumental” composition. But at the same time, it can be seen that Homer's attitude toward his own posterity does not sound exactly like Horace's; there is a consistent awareness that signs cannot preserve all that they cover, and several climactic episodes show how physical signs are vulnerable to destruction.

Although the question of when and how the Homeric poems were written down remains open, it is at least clear that there came a time when a singer contemplated the idea of fixing his songs in a lasting form, and I think that this moment is actually reflected on in the poems through the archaic technique of grave making. But first we will need a typology of signs.

**Strange Objects on the Ground**

Although Homer knew the alphabetic writing of his own day, it is no part of the world of his heroes. The point is made, perhaps even insisted upon, in a little comedy of illiteracy played by the Greek soldiers as they draw lots to choose a champion among themselves (*Il. 7.175–190*). The procedure is a cumbersome
affair: each hero inscribes a sign (esêmênanto) on a pebble; after they are collected and the champion’s lot is drawn, a herald must carry it around until the one who marked it looks at his sign (sêma) and recognizes it again. Thereupon the winner tosses the pebble to the ground and proclaims to the army that he has been chosen. This is a primitive kind of marking one’s name, unreadable except by the one who wrote it and needing the writer’s voice to bring its message to others. Writing is hardly a significant part of the heroic world.

Once such a “text” has served its purpose, it is cast aside, and will remain only an odd, inscrutable scratched stone in the sand, a reminder, perhaps, that the other world, the one in which Homer sang, was also full of signs, and many of these must be assumed to have come in some way from a great past of heroic war. The landscape in which Homer sang bore traces of even earliest history, particularly in the form of signs that were hard, solid, and tangible, such as great stones or buildings. Some Greek myths evidently try to connect sights on the land with cosmic history: it is easy to see how such stories as the sacred legend about the stone at Pytho or the myth of Niobe functioned etiologically for the Greeks of Homer’s day to explain strangely shaped or strangely placed stones. This would be all the more true for heroic history, for we know that in the eighth century the Greeks were often coming across bronze-age burial sites, some marked with dressed but uninscribed stones, some yielding deposits of ancient weaponry and artifacts. These remains of great human art, far beyond the competence of eighth-century technology, were in themselves awe-inspiring, and in Homer’s time the Greeks began to make offerings at old tombs, usually without any idea of what lords lay within. Naturally such strange objects in the ground had to be accommodated to the legendary past, and the so-called Greek Renaissance was a time for coordinating these local sites and assimilating them to the oral legends of the national past. And Homer himself takes part by showing us his heroes trying to interpret marks on the landscape and indeed trying to mark it with their presence in turn.

This is natural enough, since he was singing on ground that many of these heroes had crossed and was putting before the eyes of his audiences things that had happened in the places they might
live in or visit or hear about from others. But the relationship between the stories Homer sang and these splendid warrior tombs appears to have been the opposite of what we might expect. 14 His purpose was not to provide the stories to go along with the various local antiquities but rather to provide an account of the past that transcended all the individual stories told at individual shrines. In fact, the general picture that Homer presents of the death and burial of heroes would have discouraged his contemporaries from tying his poems to any physical remains of the Mycenean past: Homer's heroes are cremated, their bones removed, and each individual's ashes covered over by a separate mound, his name preserved by oral tradition. This kind of burial was in contrast to the Mycenean relics, which were as a rule collective inhumations, and the cults first established there apparently did not name the hero particularly. 15 Homer's eschatology, too, suggests that the dead heroes are radically separated from the living and beyond the reach of their local rites. 16 His Panhellenic world of heroes is deliberately distinct from local figures of cult, and he works to bury and memorialize his heroes in his own way. 17 This self-differentiation of his lore from the cult at tombs opened up in his day involves Homer in a meditation on how the great efforts of men from the past may leave their mark on the landscape, or fail to, and, conversely, how

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14 The significance of the rise of hero cults in the eighth century is a complex matter, involving social and economic factors (such as the growth of populations, re-settlement of land, and rise of the city-state) and no doubt having particular functions in particular places (Whitley [1988]). But as to the relationship of this phenomenon to the poetry of Homer, I think we cannot follow Coldstream ([1976] and [1977] 341–356), who sees the eighth-century rise of cults at Mycenean tombs as the result of Homeric poetry (indeed of the poems we have). Rather, the first such cults at tombs (embracing both the recently and long dead) are clearly not directed at the heroes of epic. It is thus more probable that Homer is a parallel but quite separate aspect of a general revival of interest in the past; see the next note.

15 Archaeological evidence indicates that such ancient figures as were venerated would have been anonymous for the audience of Homer. Hesiod would have placed them in mythic history among the “Silver” race, unnamed but separate and earlier than the epic heroes; see Snodgrass (1980) 38–40, (1982), and (1987) 159–165 and Morris (1988).

16 On Homeric eschatology, see Burkert (1985) 194–199.

17 A main theme of Nagy's work on the Iliad (1979) is to show how Panhellenic epic and local cult are complementary ways of preserving the past; see esp. 114–117, 159–161, 206–209.
the visible and tangible world around us may disclose or fail to disclose the past.

For the poet to reflect on the way actions might mark the landscape is the first level of the question of how one might fix one's own story fast. Etiology is not the sole concern of epic poetry, of course, but in accommodating the physical world to his poetry, Homer speaks of the signs of the past and tells us how they work and how they fail. These observations on signs may be read as observations on a prototypical kind of writing, for even the roughest objects left from the past suggest the possibility that a great action might leave its enduring, physical trace. And when human art contrives to leave such traces, it is possible to ask if fame can be inscribed in some way so that later generations might look at an object and learn the past. The stories surrounding these signs express a poet's view of how fleeting but momentous events might leave a memorial and are a preface for us to his idea of fixing heroic action in a text.

The signs in the Homeric world that come closest to writing as sign are the solid terrestrial signs, objects that some great event in the past has left on the ground to be "read" by later generations. As the regularities of nature were sometimes broken by portents and prodigies, the landscape was most mysteriously significant where it rose inexplicably in mounds or was marked with stones and boulders. Such objects may seem to invoke a kind of response that is simpler and more banal than "reading," but it must be remembered how impressive the solidity, durability, and strength of stone could be: its sheer massiveness and independence have evoked religious awe in many ancient societies, including Greece, as Pausanias says: "If one goes back in time, one sees the Greeks paying honor not to statues but to unwrought stones [argoi lithoi]." Stones could be signs of a meaning beyond themselves, and such rough objects as Pausanias refers to early served to mark a place as sacred. In archaic Greek poetry something of this magic power in stones is still discernible, especially so when their permanence and unchangingness enables them to carry meaning through time. In the worlds of Homer and Hesiod, stones can be a machine to

preserve *kleos*: a physical rock is the solid counterpart to a speech handed down in time as a way of preserving meaning. And if a new machine is found, if it is possible for writing to fix fame and endure unchanged through time, it will be on the model of these strange objects on the ground.

The quintessential signifying stone was the *sêma* of Zeus at Pytho. This was an ancient rock in the heart of Delphi which the Greeks venerated from their earliest past, oiling it and offering it various ministrations. It is sacred because of its history, which is given by Hesiod: this was the stone that was wrapped in swaddling clothes and given to Cronus when he meant to swallow Zeus. Later, when Zeus came of age and released his Olympian siblings from his father’s belly, the stone was the first to come out:

First he vomited out the stone that he had eaten last;  
this then Zeus set fast on the wide-wayed earth  
in sacred Pytho under the glens of Parnassus  
to be a *sêma* thereafter, a marvel for mortal men.  

*Theogony 497–500*

What Zeus does to make this stone a sign is fix it, plant it in the earth; in itself the unwrought stone is no sure sign: it has already been disguised, misread, swallowed up, and moved. But once set fast, it becomes the most fixed sign of all, providing a point of orientation in the wide-wayed earth and signifying to wondering later men Zeus’s continuing sovereignty. In Homer too, the gods make such immortal signs: Odysseus reminds the Greeks that when they were sacrificing under a plane tree at Aulis, “a great *sêma* appeared” (*ll. 2.308*): a snake crawled from the altar and devoured a mother sparrow and her brood; then “the very god who made it appear made it very conspicuous *[arizélon]* / for Zeus the son of Cronus turned it to stone” (*2.318–319*). Odysseus calls the prodigious snake a “sign” when it first appears, for it is a portent; but it may also be termed a “sign” proleptically, for it will attain undying fame once it is petrified: Calchas announces that Zeus had sent this as a “portent late to be fulfilled, whose *kleos* will never die” (*2.325*). Here again, a sign is made by a magical fixation; once
its motion is arrested, it can remain rooted to that spot by that fair
plane tree, to be recalled and compared with what it signified.\textsuperscript{19}

Mortals too took stones and tried to make them monuments of
their own deeds to secure some remembrance of them in aftertime.
A marked grave with a tumulus and perhaps a stone stele above it
is also called a \textit{sêma}, or sign of the place of burial. To call a tomb a
\textit{sêma} is to bring the making of objects as a means of preserving the
past very close to the function of epic poetry. The warriors at Troy
traverse a landscape that bears witness to older heroes who had
been there before. The \textit{“sêma of ancient Ilus,”} for example, the
tomb of one of Troy’s ancestral heroes, lies next to a wild fig tree
and has above it a stele \textit{“wrought by man”} (\textit{andrókmètos} [\textit{ll.} 11.166–
167, 371]). For the Trojans it marks a meeting place on the field of
action, and for the poet it orients the movements of his characters
(\textit{ll.} 10.415, 24.349). Homer’s heroes themselves expect such monu-
ments in their turn, so that their own names and exploits might be
remembered. So Hector, calling for single combat, prescribes the
etiquette of ideal heroic burial: the winner may take the armor of
the vanquished but must return his body to his people for rites of
commemoration. \textit{“If I win,”} he says,

\begin{quote}
the corpse I will send back to the well-benched ships
so that the long-haired Achaeans may give it rites
and heap a \textit{sêma} for him beside the broad Hellespont;
and sometime someone among later born men may say
as he sails over the wine dark sea in a ship of many oars;
\textit{“This is the sêma of a man who died long ago,\kern1pt
a warrior, whom once upon a time glorious Hector killed.”}\kern1pt
So sometime someone will say; and my \textit{kleos} will never die.
\end{quote}

\textit{[Iliad 7.84–91]}

This sign too will become a sign when it has been placed some-
where and set fast. It will preserve an undying glory not by being
inscribed but by being conspicuous, being visible even from off-
shore in later times. Like Achilles’ tomb on the headland of the

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{ll.} 2.307. in Pausanias’s time (9.19.5) the remnants of this tree were preserved in
the temple of Artemis at Aulis.
Hellespont, which the *Odyssey* describes as “shining afar to men on the high sea / to those now born and those who will be hereafter” (*Od.* 24.83–84), and like other signs called “conspicuous” (*arignōtos*) or “easily distinguished,” the mere sight of the tomb mound will give rise to recollection of Hector’s heroism.\(^{20}\)

The purpose of these signs is like the purpose of epic, to fix a heroic exploit so that “those to come after may find out about it,” and the parallel to the heroic tomb and the epic poem has been noted.\(^{21}\) But the essential difference between them is also clear: the function of tomb is not to be read but to be conspicuous: it only gives the impetus to the speech that will interpret it. When Menelaus is wounded, Agamemnon imagines the expedition gone home in defeat and some Trojan dancing on his brother’s tomb, boasting of the Greeks’ failure, “So sometime someone will say, and may the broad earth then swallow me up” (*Il.* 4.182). The oral tradition is the necessary supplement to the durable, provocative, but unreadable sign.

In addition, Homer, perhaps with understandable self-interest, also points out that humanly wrought artifacts do not even succeed in their primary requirements of durability and fixity: they neither always last nor always stay in their original places. Consider the history of one such “clear sign” that old Nestor describes to his son as he points out to him the best turning point on a race course:

> I will give you a clear sign [sēma] that you cannot fail to notice. There is a dry stump standing up from the ground about six feet, of oak or pine; it has not been wholly rotted away by rainwater, and two white stones are leaned against it, one on either side, at the turning point of the course, and there is smooth driving around it.

Either it is the grave marker [sēma] of someone who died long ago, or was set as a racing goal by men who lived before our time, and now Achilles has made it the turning point of the race.

[*Iliad* 23.326–334]

\(^{20}\) Other “conspicuous signs” *Il.* 2.318, 13.244; cf. 23.326. Nagy (1983) studies the noticing, recognition, and “interpretation” of *sēmata*.

\(^{21}\) On *kleos* and tomb, see Redfield (1975) 34; Murnaghan (1987) 157, references in n. 20; and Sinos (1980) 48.
The sign Nestor points out to his son is barely still a sign, or rather it is an old sign that has lost its original purpose and gained a new one: the rain has already started to work on the wood, so that one can no longer tell even what kind of a tree it was; the stones endure, and by their unnatural, propped-up position indicate that this is an object wrought by earlier men. Yet for these Greeks on a foreign shore the sign is nearly meaningless. Nestor cannot guess whose grave it was meant to mark, or even whether it was meant to mark anyone’s fame at all. If there is some unnamed hero underneath, he is surely in danger of losing his fame.

Apart from the threat of erosion, monuments are vulnerable to the possibility that they might be moved. Fixity is the first important feature of Zeus’s sign and especially important for funeral markers. A stone fixed over a grave had at first perhaps a magical property, holding the dead person’s soul in place, to be rolled away only with resurrection; but in eighth-century Greece the grave-stone could also serve to mark the place of cult tendance: only at that particular spot would libations and other offerings find their way to departed ancestors. Homer’s heroes know nothing of this, but for them too the funeral stone ideally is fixed fast: in a simile a hero is bewitched by Poseidon and unable to move, like a stele \( (Iliad \ 13.437) \), and Achilles’ horses stand fast, “as a stele stays fixed in the ground \([empedon]\), standing over the tomb / of some man or woman” \( (Iliad \ 17.434-435) \). But the heroic age is also a time when stones are disturbed. Tydeus picks up and hurls a boulder described as “a great thing/work \([mega \ ergon]\), such as no two men, / such as they are now, could lift” \( (Iliad \ 5.302-304) \). And when Athena takes the field she undoes the work of men of old:

\begin{quote}
Yielding, she picked up a stone with her large hand
lying in the plain, black, rough, and huge
which former men had put as a boundary of ploughlands.

\[Iliad \ 21.403-405\]
\end{quote}

This stone is unwrought, yet, like the stone in the race course, had once been significantly placed. But the goddess has erased the border; wherever it lands it will have lost its original significance.

In the \textit{Iliad}, Hector, Ajax, and Aeneas also pick up and throw
such stones. If we live long after these disturbing heroes, we know that the landscape has been altered; we can’t rely on the rocks and hills and trees to stand fast and let us read the past in them. Likewise, the stories in which they may have figured can be lost, as when Homer describes a hill standing out on the Trojan plain. It is steep, set off by a smooth track around it: “This men call by the name Bateia / but the immortals the sêma of far leaping Myrine” (ll. 2.813–814). The steep hill is a mark on the landscape; set off by the level ground like Nestor’s blasted oak, it attracts our attention. Yet men can name it only from what is on it, “Briar Hill.” Only the gods know what is under it, know it is in fact a tomb. Who knows how many heroes of the past have had their name and fame buried under such nameless tumuli?

Of course the poet knows and can tell us in his god-sponsored speech. From this we see that Hector should not expect to find his undying glory in that sêma he bargained for; only in the poet’s song will his burial be remembered. The oral traditions that center on various local antiquities, the stories one hears upon asking, “Whose tomb is that?” are not so durable or so reliable as this poetry, which turns not to the ground for the past but to the Olympian Muses. It is not surprising that the signs of the past need the oral tradition to explicate them or that, for Homer the poet, song alone can provide “immortal fame.” But Homer seems to go beyond self-assertion here to undertake an aggressive war on the visible; he seems determined to show that no tangible, visible thing can be trusted to mark the fames of men accurately and enduringly. It is difficult to see the poet who takes such a stance toward the past as commending the making of artifacts out of his own tales. It is difficult to see a poet in this mood entrusting his song to marks that can be destroyed, removed, or misread. The true epic, the total knowledge of every hero who fell before Troy, is not inscribed on any stone, far less on leather or papyrus; it has no authoritative physical form. Such may be the meaning in the fate of the great Achaean wall.


The Achaean Wall and the *Iliad*

The strangest object on the ground at Troy is the great defensive wall the Greeks erect in book 7 of the *Iliad*, which is finally destroyed without a trace when the Greeks go home, as we hear in book 12. The episode is peculiar in many ways and has been written off as an interpolation into the poem, possibly added as late as the fifth century. How early and how authentic the passage may be are less important to me than that it is clearly a part of the *Iliad* as we now have it. Whoever composed it and whenever he did, it seems that it was worked into a poem of approximately the scope of our text. In fact I maintain that this wall, which is also a tomb, in many ways corresponds to the text itself, insofar as both are immense constructs meant to preserve through time the memory of the action before Troy. Homer’s persistent interest in the project of constructing this wall and its eventual fate may have been a way for him to think about making permanent heroic reminders like the *Iliad*. In such a case, the fate of the wall would seem to indicate that even such an artifact may not, for all its sheer massiveness and fixity, hope to escape destruction unless the gods will it.

During a temporary truce for burying bodies, Nestor proposes that the Greeks collect their dead scattered in the Scamander River and, after burning them and putting the bones in urns, that they heap up over the pyre a massive collective tomb, gathering the material “indiscriminately from the plain.” This tomb he proposes to use as part of a great defensive wall to stave off Trojan advances (7.327–343). His plan is carried out and it is a “great work” (*mega ergon*), marveled at by the gods (7.444).

Hector derides the builders and the fortifications—“fools who have contrived these walls / meager, not worth a thought” (8.177–178)—but he is not wholly right. The gods take note of the great work, particularly Poseidon. When he looks down at it from heaven, he fears that it will eclipse the “intelligence and cunning of the

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24 For discussion and bibliography, see Webster (1964) 252 and Scodel (1982).
immortals”; he predicts that “its kleos will last, as far as dawn light is scattered, / and men will forget that wall which I and Apollo / built with great toil for Laomedon the hero” (7.450–451). Zeus assures his brother that his fame will not suffer diminishment and proposes that the wall be destroyed after the Achaeans go home (7.458–463). And the actual destruction is recounted, in prospect, as a digression later in the poem. After Troy was sacked in the tenth year, the poet tells us, and the Achaeans had gone home, Poseidon and Apollo contrived to create a flood of rivers, which, together with constant rain from Zeus, reduced the wall to flotsam; they uprooted the stone foundations that the Achaeans had laid with such toil and made the beach level again, smoothing it over with sand and returning the rivers to their courses (12.13–33).

The episode is peculiar in two ways. First, it is odd that we hear about the wall’s destruction at all: Homer often alludes to events before and after the limits of his story, but he does not usually recount them. It is significant that here alone he reaches outside the range of his story to narrate the event. Second, the destruction of the wall is told from a different perspective from that of the rest of the epic: Homer not only leaves the plot outlines of the Iliad but also, with a single word, shifts his perspective to the here-and-now of his unheroic audience.25 The key word occurs in a description of one of the flooding rivers, “Simoeis, where many cowhide shields and helmets / fell in the mud together with the race of the men who were half-gods” (12.22–23). “Half-gods” translates hémithoei, a word Homer uses only here for the “men” (andres) or “heroes” of former times. “Half-gods” suggests that the heroes are not just earlier men but a quite separate “race” between present men and the gods; this notion violates the normal epic representation of heroes as great though mortal warriors from the past. Moreover, the word expresses a different stance of the poet toward his past. The same word occurs significantly in Works and Days when Hesiod recounts to Perses a history of the races of men: in this history, which is told retrospectively from the late, corrupt iron age, the generations who fought at Thebes and Troy (as he puts it, those who fought for the flocks of Oedipus and for Helen), are called

25Nagy (1979) 159 has a valuable discussion of the passage.
“half-gods, an earlier generation on the boundless earth” (160).26 The word “half-gods” brings with it a unepic ethos: it is the word one uses in speaking of heroes from a distance, contemplating the heroic age retrospectively as something apart, utterly remote in time. Using this word in the *Iliad*, then, Homer is looking back on his heroes collectively from outside his poem as a vanished and separate race. Here alone he steps outside the plot of his poem and away from the narrator’s ethos to speak from his own age of a very distant time.27

The destruction of the Achaean wall, then, seems an intrusion or at least an excursus in the epic, and its function has long been a puzzle. The predominant ancient explanation assumed that the whole episode of the wall’s construction was a Homeric invention (it does nicely prolong suspense and acutely symbolizes Greek losses); but the difficulty with the invention would be that any of Homer’s audience who had traveled the Hellespont (which was a busy trade route in the eighth century) would have seen no such wall; accordingly, “since the poet himself assembled the wall, for this reason he also made it disappear, thus making any opportunity of refuting him disappear at the same time.”28 But a study by Ruth Scodel dismisses this explanation and seeks to bring the destruction of the wall into connection with other early Greek and ultimately Near Eastern myths in which a great destruction marks a historic breach between god and man. In her reading, the story of the Achaean wall depicts the Trojan War as a catastrophe that cut off god-born heroes from later generations; such an idea can be traced in fragments of Hesiod and the *Cypria*, and in Near Eastern stories we see clearly how the a race of demigods may be washed away in a cosmic deluge, marking an end of an age and the loss of all its works. As parallels Scodel mentions, in addition to the Flood story proper, the Nephilim who appear just before the flood in

26This perspective is like that in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 204.100 M-W) conceiving of the earliest heroes as a distinct, hybrid class. See West (1978) 176–177 and 191, on *Works and Days* 160.

27So ἑμιθεοὶ is glossed in a threnody by Simonides in order explicitly to relate the sorrows of present mourners to those of early heroes: “Not even those who lived long ago / who were born as the sons of the lordly gods, half-gods, / not even they spent their lives and reached old age / without toil, ruin, danger” (523 Page).

Genesis, clearly analogous to the demigods of *Iliad* 12.23, and the destruction of the tower of Babel through divine anger, which marked the scattering of the “famous men.” On her view, these motifs have come into the monumental *Iliad* not only in its mention of “half-gods” but also in the flooding rivers that are alike a turning loose of primeval waters to destroy the achievements of the age: “The literal flood which wipes away all trace of the Achaean camp preserves its original function; the wall is destroyed less because the poet was afraid of being challenged to point to its remains than because its disappearance gives a solemn air of finality. At its very center, the poem places its events far away in a past which becomes remote and fated not only to end, but to vanish.”

I find the case persuasive that Near Eastern motifs cluster about this wall and that here, more strongly than elsewhere in the Homeric poems, we are presented with the utter separateness of bygone heroes and the complete loss of any trace of them. But I think the poet of the *Iliad* has stepped outside his poem to say more than that. Scodel notes that the wall’s destruction involves the destruction of *kleos*, and the question of preserving fame is inextricable from the story as it appears in the *Iliad*: the wall, after all, starts out as a kind of tomb, and it is the widespread fame promised by the wall that provokes Poseidon’s jealousy and Zeus’s reassurances. Homer is surely saying something too about the possibilities of preserving the fame of the Trojan War in physical form.

I think that in view of the epic’s interest in signs as concrete devices for making fame last, the Achaean wall is relevant to the project of the epic poet, particularly one faced with the signs of writing. In this passage the poet is most “outside” the epic, and from this perspective his interest in the survival of signs cannot be wholly separate from the survival of an epic as a physical text. Indeed the Achaean wall may be taken as a figure for a written-down *Iliad*. A construction begun with Nestor’s weaving (7.324), it is a massive monument that will comprehend the remains of innu-

29Gen. 6.1–4, 11.1–9; Scodel (1982) 42, 46.
31Scodel (1982) 48 n. 1, citing Nagy (1979) 160. Poseidon’s additional complaint, that it has been built without a libation, is “a commonplace, motive hunting” (Scodel [1982] 34).
merable heroes; the enormous fame of the wall will not be loca-
ized, like Hector’s, but will reach “as far as dawn light is scat-
tered.” I conceive of the episode of the wall, for all its ancient
elements, as formulated along with the plan to construct a monu-
mental text of the Iliad of the sort we now have. As Scodel notes, its
destruction is put in the “very center” of the poem, and this place-
ment can be significant only if the general shape of the epic were
already contemplated. If the episode was written or dictated by a
poet who knew what final shape his poem would have, it seems to
me possible that he might have thought something about the
strange thing he was helping bring into the world. And at its
midpoint he could have stepped out of his story for a moment and
given us a heroic parable about the relation of song to text. Ho-
mer’s wall is a machine for defense but also for fame, and its
destruction may speak not only of the end of an age but also of the
impossibility of finding any physical trace of the Trojan War, of
finding any solid, tangible embodiment of such glory.

We are told that the wall was destroyed “in the tenth year . . .
after the Achaeans went home” (II. 12.12–16), but the preceding
sentence describes its duration in different terms:

As long as Hector was alive and Achilles was wrathful
and the city of Priam was yet unsacked,
so long the great wall of the Achaeans was fixed firmly in the
ground.

[Iliad 12.10–12]

The first line is remarkable because, whether by chance or not, it is
the only time in Homer that the structure of either text is precisely
delineated. This line defines the action of the Iliad, which begins
with the wrath of Achilles and ends with Hector’s funeral, far more
exactly than the opening of any epic poem defines its theme.32 The
next line may seem to break this parallel between wall and Iliad,

32Scholiast T on 12.9–12 seems to have read the passage similarly: “The poet sets
forth summarily the gist of his composition. He indicates that what holds the Iliad
together are two characters, and at the same time hints at what will happen later,
because after Achilles’ rage and once Hector is no longer alive the Iliad itself ends
directly.”
since it brings in the sack of Troy, something beyond the confines of this epic. Yet at Iliad 22.405–411 the poet equates Hector’s death with the fall of Troy,33 so that, in view of this symbolic equivalence, line 11 may taken as effectively synonymous with line 10: it need not be read as an addition, “and the wall also lasted longer (even after Achilles was assuaged and Hector died), up until the fall of Troy,” but, as often in paratactic style, as cumulative: “while Achilles raged and Hector was alive, that is to say, while the fall of Troy was delayed.”34

In this case, the wall is said to last as long as the Iliad lasts. The wall then is a construct very much like the proto-text of the Iliad: it has a fixed form and a fixed duration, encompassing a definite stretch of events that mark a great ritardando in the larger story of the sack of Troy. In this moment of objectivity the poet is able to speak accurately about the size of his work and to endow his wall with the same dimensions.

If the wall is associated with the Iliad as a monumental construct, its destruction demonstrates a certain vulnerability of any text of the Iliad from an oral poet’s point of view. For all the advantages of fixity in physical form, a text is nevertheless, like Nestor’s sêma, only a human construct. The wall is called “unbreakable” (arrêktos), a very strong word for a human artifact, since elsewhere it is used of divine objects or attributes, including the “unbreakable” wall that the gods made for Troy, for which the Achaean wall seems to be a rival (14.56–58, 21.446–447). But the gods are not mocked; Apollo breaches it at one point with the ease of a child knocking over a sand castle (15.362–364). In the end Poseidon and Apollo not only dismantle the wall, they obliterate any trace of it from the landscape. The role of the flood in the final destruction is significant not only because of the hovering Near Eastern myths but also because, in Greek terms, eroding rains, washing streams, and destructive torrents are the elements most inimical to the hopes of graves and tombs. In fact the watery elements of destruction, those eroders of monuments and submersers of fame, perform on this

33As Griffin (1980) 1 and others have noted.
34That is, I read these lines as a “Homeric simile”: the framing lines “As long as . . . so long . . .” (12.10, 12.13) give the essential point of the comparison, like the “just as . . .” and “so . . .” in similes. What is in between may be expansion, divagation, or as here, repetition.
wall what James Redfield has called an “antifuneral,” the symbolic opposite of commemoration.  

Because the wall is for the gods (and perhaps too for the Ionian poet) predominantly a device for preserving fame, its destruction is the special undoing of tombs through floods and the rains of Zeus, which “diminish the works of men” (16.392).

The antifuneral is vividly depicted in book 21 when Achilles battles the rivers. Burial by water is the leitmotif of this scene: Achilles has killed Lycaon and flung him into the river, proclaiming that he will never get a funeral (21.122–125); he kills Pelegon, descended from a river god, and boasts that all waters must yield to Zeus and Zeus's descendants (21.186–199). But the river Sca­mander responds and attacks Achilles, uprooting, as rivers can, a great elm with which Achilles tries to brace himself (21.242–244). Achilles then fears the lowly death of drowning and would rather have died by Hector (21.279–283); the reason is the kind of burial that such a death promises in the person of Scamander:

> his splendid arms somewhere below the water
> will lie covered with mud; and his body
> I will bury in the sands, piling on a great heap of pebbles,
> numberless [murion], and the Achaeans will not know how
to collect his bones, with so much shingle will I cover him over.
> There will his sēma be shaped, and there will be no need
of heaping a tomb over him for his burial.

[Iliad 22.317–323]

The antifuneral produces an antimonument: not solidity but mud, not structure but disintegration, not order but the unlimited. We will never be able to recover any part of Achilles or any object he held. The destruction of the Achaean wall is similar: it will be disfigured, it will lose its appearance and form:

> Break up the wall and pour it into the sea
> and cover the great shore again with sand
> in this way let the great wall of the Achaeans be disfigured.

[Iliad 7.461–463]

36The verb amaldunai in 7.463 and 12.18 32 is also used to describe Demeter, “disfiguring her form/appearance [eidos]” in the Hymn to Demeter 94.
The flood that will erode this wall-tomb, then, is also an erasing of any text of this poem and reveals another aspect of Homer’s hostility to the presumptive monument. With this literally central episode, the text of the *Iliad* reaches out of the past to inform its audience about their own world and how it is to be read. Another archaic epic, the *Shield of Heracles*, uses a similar iconoclastic gesture to punctuate its conclusion. After telling the story of the death of a Thessalian hero, Cyncus, and the great funeral his father the king held for him, it adds that in the end Apollo was angry at the hero and urged a local river, the Anaurus, to “make the grave and sêma of Cyncus unseen [aides].”

To acknowledge writing, to use it in making a text is one thing; to exalt it as a way of transcending the limits of time and the powers of nature is hubris. Such cautious reservations run deep in Greek literature and surface long before Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Even a quite literate poet working in the fifth century, indeed, one whose epitaphs were inscribed on stone, knew the limits of writing. When Simonides read or heard the boast inscribed on a grave stele that it would bear its message “as long as water flows and tall trees grow,” he retorted, “All things are less than the gods, and stone even mortal hands can shatter”; for an inscribed statue to last forever “is the expectation of a fool” (581.5–7 Page). This partly religious awe of the written word or the fixed marker is not alien to Homer, and a recent reading of the *Iliad* by Michael Lynn-George has also focused on the relations between sign, tomb, text; he says of the Achaean wall that “within the *Iliad* the contemplation of the sign of survival is also combined with a consideration of the possibility of the survival of the sign.”

A concern with the possible destruction of the text may seem an exclusively modern concern, and to use heroic stories for such a self-referential meditation may seem rather sophisticated. Yet the fascination with writing and its powers, dangers, and failures is

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37 *Shield of Heracles* 477; cf. Janko (1986) for the context of the song.

38 Lynn-George (1988) 252. It was only after completing this chapter that I obtained this insightful, avowedly modern reading of the *Iliad* as a twentieth-century text. In my attempt to extract Homer’s ideas of texts in their historical context, I find myself in agreement with many of Lynn-George’s observations on the passages in this and the preceding section.
probably as old as writing itself and also appears in Near Eastern stories, for example, in the motif of the “fateful letter” at the heart of the Bellerophon story.\(^{39}\) It may be that along with writing, much of this material also came from the East. Certainly, to confine ourselves to the Old Testament, we can find a number of stones and steles that behave like fixed signs and witnesses, marking sacred places. The swaddled Pythian stone placed by Zeus to be the center of his shrine is like that stone pillow Jacob erected to be a sacred pillar, which is also anointed with oils.\(^{40}\) There is also an ambiguous covenant stone marking the frontier between Aram and Israel, which has different names in Aramaic and Hebrew.\(^ {41}\) And we find builders of monuments who are also writers of law: after the covenant at Schechem, Joshua wrote the law of God in a book and set a great stone under an oak in the sanctuary of the Lord; Moses wrote down the words of the Lord and erected an alter with twelve pillars.\(^ {42}\) And the death and burial of this prophet, who saw god face-to-face and whose like has not arisen in Israel since (34.9–10), have an evasiveness about them: “but no man knows the place of his burial to this day” (Deut. 34.5–6). Finally there is a tension between the stone as marking the place of God’s presence and not being that presence—hence iconoclasm, the rejection of these stones by the Law and the Prophets.\(^ {43}\) This religious scruple has its literary counterpart in the denigration of writing down or otherwise fixing the poetry that is an epiphany of the past.

To return to Greece and the Achaean wall, the story Homer tells focuses its myth of destruction not only on the breach in history but on our loss of signs from that history. The wall may be taken as the greatest of the Iliad’s failed monuments and hence the failure of any monument of the Trojan War itself. The ancient explanation, that Homer razed it to account for the lack of a wall at Troy, naïve-sounding as it is, is not to be wholly rejected. The assertion of our

\(^{39}\)E.g., 2 Sam. 11.14ff.

\(^{40}\)Gen. 28.18—this after his ladder dream, suggestive of the ambitions of Babel.


\(^{42}\)Jos. 24.26 (one thinks of Nestor’s “oak or pine.” Cf. Gen. 28.18; Ex. 24.4; Jg. 9.6.); Ex. 24.4

\(^{43}\)See Ex. 23.34: “You will not bow down to their gods or worship them or observe their rites, but throw them down and smash their cultic stones.” Cf. 34.13; Lv. 26.1; Dt. 7.5, 12.3, 16.22; and among the prophets, Ho. 3.4, 10.1; Mi. 5.12.
total separateness from that time would only be strengthened by saying that the past is not only passed but gone without a trace. If Poseidon washed the wall away, if the Greeks took Nestor’s advice and brought the bones of their comrades home, and if water had scattered their armor, it would still be possible to believe in Homer’s time that the relatively placid Troad had been the site of all the mayhem in the *Iliad*.

The *Iliad*, then, shows clearly the futility of writing any history on the landscape, and given the parallel between tomb building and epic making, we have read here too a refutation of the possibility of fixing any song for good. The *kleos* of Troy will not be carried in the great wall; of all the vulnerable signs that heroic men have put up, it boded to be the greatest but was assuredly the most futile. And since the wall’s duration is equated with the poem’s action, the destruction of the wall is the denial of any physical form of the *Iliad*. A mere text will be eroded, erased, removed from its proper place; no hero’s body will be retrieved from it. I can situate such a motif only in the doubts of an oral poet confronting his own making of a text. The wall seems to provoke a jealousy in Homer as well as Poseidon, a fear that the contrivance and the mind of the gods will be overshadowed by this construct.

This Homer, then, would not have agreed with literate Horace’s firm confidence in literary immortality. He knew too well that destructive waters are the enemies of texts as well as kingly tombs, that infinite, uncountable sands are irresistibly corrosive, that dissolution and unreadability encroach on any structure. Making texts will not stave off this disintegration, even if they aspire to outdo the most permanent Eastern style (*Odes* 3.30):

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Exegi monumentum aere perennius  
regalique situ pyramidum altius,  
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens  
possit diruere aut innumerabilis  
annorum series et fuga temporum.
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I have brought to completion a monument more lasting than bronze
and higher than pyramids, royally built,
one that no devouring storm, no raging North wind
can dissolve into pieces, not the uncountable succession of years or the flight of ages.

After a consideration of the signs at Troy, this doesn’t sound like the maker of the *Iliad*.

The *Odyssey* and Cenotaphs

The *Odyssey* is no less interested than the *Iliad* in reading and making signs, and many of the signs in this more overtly self-referring poem have been closely read as in some way expressing the poet’s work. One could develop a preliminary typology of signs in the *Odyssey* that would be compatible with and complement those in the *Iliad*.44 Let us, however, proceed immediately to the use of *sêma* as a figure for the monumental epic text, the tomblike embodiment of its hero’s fame. For it is evident that the *Odyssey* knows this conceit from the *Iliad* and that it develops it quite playfully, both as aimed at earlier “monumental” texts and as evading a final fixation for itself.

44Perhaps no sign has been more often read than Odysseus’s scar (called a *sêma* at 21.217, 23.73), by which he is identified after being away from Ithaca for twenty years. The scar served as the emblem for Erich Auerbach’s powerful and often resisted reading of Homeric poetry as all surface without depth (nicely discussed in Freccero [1986]). But I will not engage here the readings that have flowed from this; I note only that the themes I have developed from the *Iliad*, a suspicion of signs and a praise of their oral supplements, attend this sign too. Oddly enough, this portable, indelible sign, which is almost a name written on his body, becomes less persuasive the closer Odysseus gets to home. When his father asks him for a “clear sign” of who he is, Odysseus reveals the scar, but he convinces the old man only after he recites a catalog of trees he had heard from him as a boy (24.329, 336–346). In a similar way, Penelope is famously unpersuaded by the scar and asks Odysseus in addition for the “secret signs” shared between them (23.110). By this she means their bed, the quintessential artifact: an olive tree surrounded with a well-built wall (192–194), then cut and finished with precious metals and stone (195–200). The natural has been wholly transformed into a sign of their fidelity, and its function as sign is immovability. Penelope suggests to Odysseus that the bed is not now where it once was, and his amazement—“it would be hard even for a shrewd man to move the bed, but with a god’s help he might do it easily”—is what convinces her (184–188). Signs are clearly a plaything for this poet too, and oral memory is needed here to supplement this writing.
As we try to imagine the monumental composer of the *Odyssey*, we can agree that he must have come after the *Iliad*. The intriguing question is whether he knew the *Iliad* (and other epic poems) as a text or only as a tradition, an earlier path of the *klea andrôn* that he himself might “move along” if he liked. He certainly knows many of the traditions surrounding Troy’s fall, but would the *Iliad* have been a *text* for him, a set of lines in some way fixed (by writing or memorization) so that it was a definite and definitive version of the Wrath of Achilles? There is some indication that the *Odyssey* knew the *Iliad* as a text in this strong sense in the fact—known as Monro’s law—that the *Odyssey* never refers to any incident recounted in the *Iliad*. Such consistent exclusion over such a long story with so many flashbacks can be taken as evidence that the later poem is deliberately avoiding the *Iliad* as the version we have of Achilles’ wrath.\(^{45}\)

Other evidence has been found that may be taken to point in the same direction,\(^{46}\) but let us pursue Monro’s law, because there is one passage in the *Odyssey* that apparently violates it, a reference in book 24 to the burial of Patroclus, a matter well treated in the *Iliad*. To see the significance of this departure, we must consider its context. In the underworld, Agamemnon is consoling Achilles because “not even in your death did you lose your name but always / and among all men you will have a noble fame” (24.93–94). He has described the hero’s funeral: Thetis and her nymphs attended the mourning, the Muses themselves sang (24.60); when they had gathered the bones,

Your mother gave  
a golden jar, the gift of Dionysus

\(^{45}\)On Monro’s law, see Nagy (1979) 20–21 (who would speak only of a fixing of “traditions”) and, from a different point of view, Schein (1984) 38 (who would leave open the possibility that Homer composed both poems, but in sequence). Schein also takes the allusion to Patroclus’s burial in *Od. 24* as a violation of Monro’s law (44 n. 79).

\(^{46}\)The implications of Pucci’s study of the Sirens (1979) (extended in [1987]) are radical, for he aims to show how certain phrases of the *Iliad* can be used in the *Odyssey* as “Iliadic,” that is, alluding to the former as a fixed range of expressions. In a different vein, Redfield (1973) uncovers the many ways in which the *Odyssey* seems to be aware of and reacting to the earlier great poem; similarly Griffin (1987), discussed in the next section.
she said, and the work of very famous Hephaestus.

In it lie your white bones, grand Achilles, mixed with those of dead Patroclus, but apart from those of Antilochus, whom you honored most of all your comrades after dead Patroclus. Around the bones then a great and faultless tomb we, the sacred host of Argive spearmen, piled up on a projecting headland beside the broad Hellespont, so that it would be conspicuous to men far out over the sea, to those now alive and those who will live hereafter.

[Odyssey 24.73–84]

Because of the often-praised economy of the Iliad, whereby the poem of Achilles’ rage ends with Hector’s funeral, the burden of burying its hero falls to the Odyssey. If Achilles was threatened in the Iliad with complete oblivion and an antifuneral, he ends up in the Odyssey with a superfuneral: his glory made solid in a great and faultless tomb that will reach all men, even in later times. At the heart of this memorial is a splendid artifact: it is a vessel given by the gods with the Muses heard in the background; it was wrought by Hephaestus, the master craftsman, who shares with the Odyssey’s bards the epithet “very famous.” If the Iliad could be thought of as a text at this time, it would be hard to distinguish it from that vessel that carries the fame of Achilles, mixed in with a description of Patroclus’ funeral. And here too, an apparently otiose phrase seems to identify the Iliad very specifically: Achilles’ bones were mixed with those of Patroclus “but apart from those of Antilochus.” The death of Achilles and the death of Antilochus are of course not narrated in the Iliad, but both were enshrined in that part of the tradition that has come down to us as the Aethiopis, the sequel to the Iliad. In explicitly leaving out Antilochus, the vessel here seems to exclude, too, any version of the Aethiopis and to pinpoint the Iliad, which describes Patroclus’s funeral and binds his fate to that of Achilles. The early epics are really rather concerned

47 For periklutos of bards, see Od. 1.325, 8.83, 367, 521. See Nagy (1979) on this passage, esp. 160.

with just where the bodies are buried, even though they do not always agree among themselves.

Like the Iliad, this tomb not only has a quite well defined form here but is also so fully made as to have a visible solidity: it is conspicuous or “far-shining” (tèlephanès [24.83]) so that it can be seen by those present and those to come. As a marker of Achilles’ fame, it resembles the Iliad as composed text: fixed, enduring, readable. The Odyssey thus appears to know the conceit of figuring the constructed text as a tomb and seems to apply it to the Iliad itself. One may wish to see this as a sort of tribute, though I have been persuaded by Bloom that greatly ambitious poets can rarely afford to be wholly generous to great predecessors. If the poet of the Iliad considered text fixation like monument making and then denied that any visible monument could be the real Iliad, the Odyssey poet may be doing him a dubious favor in laying out that text for all to see. It may be that in granting that too monumental text before him a glorious, superhuman fixity, the Odyssey poet hoped to retain for himself an escape from that fixation, however artful it was. Be that as it may, we can turn to the Odyssey and look for what monument it expects to make of itself, what stance it will in its turn take toward its own monumentality and writing. Since the poem seems to be willing to question how art makes signs and how signs mark burial and fame, we may ask of it how it expects to embody the fame of its own hero. To pursue this theme of sign as epic text, we may interrogate the Odyssey for its own hero’s funeral marker as a way of catching Homer’s reflections on how such a slippery hero could be finally fixed. After all, in one of his earlier speeches Odysseus reflects on the desirability of dying among one’s peers and getting proper burial rites as against the antifuneral of a watery grave (5.306–312). If we fail to find such a marker firmly fixed, we may then look for other signs that Odysseus brought home as something solid retrieved from the past.

To speak of the death and burial of Odysseus is most antithetical.

49 This passage seems to underlie Pindar’s elaborate figuration of song as architectural construct in his sixth Olympic ode (Ol. 6.2–4). He begins with the conceit that the poet will “fix fast” (paksomen) his poem on golden pillars, “to be gazed upon like a great hall” (hós hote thaëton megaron); the Odyssean debt appears when he says its proem must be a facade that is “far-gleaming” (télaugetes).
to the *Odyssey*, with its constant stress on deferring, delaying, and continuing voyages. Yet his death appears in the text, foretold by Teiresias, and a premature burial is forestalled in the first book. We recall that Athena told Telemachus that if he found out that his father was dead he should return home and heap up a sêma for him and make great funeral offerings upon it (1.291–292). The cenotaph is something not found in the *Iliad*, but the *Odyssey* gives us another one: when Menelaus finds out that Agamemnon has died, he heaps up a tomb for him in Egypt “so that his kleos might be unquenchable” (4.584). It has been suspected that there is an Odyssean irony toward heroic burial in these empty tombs and that the poet is deliberately severing the connection between kleos and stone. I think that the *Iliad* anticipated this skepticism, but the *Odyssey* does rather multiply ironies as we approach the under-world and the prospect of Odysseus’s death.

Graveyard humor attends the first scene of the necromancy when Odysseus comes across poor Elpenor. This hapless crewman, “very young, not very / brave in war, nor sound in wit” (10.552–553), had got drunk and fallen to his death from a roof on Circe’s island and as a consequence missed a proper burial. After the famous joke when Odysseus wonders how Elpenor, on foot, beat him to the underworld, Elpenor begs Odysseus to go back to Circe’s isle and heap up a sêma for him, “for those to come to find out about” (11.76). Elpenor instructs Odysseus on the kind of memorial he desires: “And plant an oar on my tomb / one I rowed with when I was among my companions” (11.77–78). Though an oar would not be a bad sign for a sailor, wood is hardly the stuff of which one makes monuments to endure “for those to come.” Additionally, Aeaea seems a rather out-of-the-way place for such a landmark, and there is something generally droll about such scrupulous concern for the rites of this unheroic person.

Soon after, Teiresias prepares Odysseus for his return and vengeance on the suitors and enjoins on him a new voyage. No sooner than he is home and settled, he will have to take on a post-*Odyssey* odyssey: Odysseus, the man who was “very much / buffeted . . .

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50See Pucci’s recent study (1987).
51Redfield (1975) 230 n. 15 says that these examples show that the association has become “purely conventional”; cf. Maehler (1963) 27.
and knew the cities and mind of many men,” describes this new voyage to Penelope as to go “to the cities of very many men” (1.1–3; 23.267). When the poem closes, then, we will know that it has not quite been able to arrest its hero; but Odysseus’s wandering apparently is not to be endless: Teiresias says there will be a “quite distinctive sign” that he has arrived at his destination. Odysseus is to take with him an oar until he comes upon men who don’t know the sea; when some passerby takes the oar on his shoulder for a winnowing fan, he is to plant it in the ground and sacrifice to Poseidon.

Teiresias next predicts for Odysseus a quiet death in prosperous old age among his beloved people (11.119–137), and there may be some connection between the two extra-Odyssean episodes predicted here, between the erecting of this marker and Odysseus’s death. The oar, of course, is to mark a spot sacred in the transaction between Odysseus and Poseidon, and possibly acts too as an etiology for inland shrines dedicated to a sea-god.52 But it is planted in the text about fifty lines after Elpenor had asked for an oar over his grave, and as Teiresias goes on to speak of Odysseus’s death but not a word of his burial or later fame, in a sense this sign making for Poseidon substitutes for any grave making or commemoration over Odysseus. Teiresias tells a story of sign making followed by death, a husteron proteron version of the standard heroic sequence of death and remembrance; following as it does the mock monument of Elpenor, that oar will have to do instead of any splendid tomb for Odysseus.53 We may infer that no more than the Iliad will the Odyssey be entombed: it will end as its hero sets out on a voyage that is much like the one on which he had set out at its very opening, and no one can predict for us where and whether he will find his secure tomb. The one monument the Odyssey tells us that its hero will leave behind is a very odd sign indeed: not only is it a cenotaph of sorts, but the “sign” that it is in the right place is that a passerby misreads it. Delighting in empty signs and wandering signifiers, the poet subtly frustrates any desire to know where we can see and read aright the spot where the body of the hero lies.

53Nagy (1983) 45 calls the oar “a stylized image of his own tomb” and adds that this tomb among those who do not know the sea is “extremely removed from Odysseus' death which comes out of the sea.” Cf. now Peradotto (1990) 65–75.
Again, if it seems too sophisticated that the *Odyssey* might be referring to how it will be fixed as text or even that it might care about such a thing, consider how the Babylonian "Odyssey" presents its hero, Gilgamesh. This wanderer has managed to secure for his report a kind of transmission that would have been most welcome to a Ninevan scribe:

He who saw everything [to the end]s of the land,  
[Who all things]s experienced, [consid]ered all  
[. . .] together [. . .],  
[. . .] of wisdom, who all things [ . . . ]  
The [hi]dden he saw, [laid bare] the undisclosed.  
He brought forth report of before the Flood,  
Achieved a long journey, weary and [w]orn.  
All his toil he engraved on a stone stela.  
Of ramparted Uruk the wall he built,  
Of hallowed Eanna, the pure sanctuary. 54

Like the *Iliad*, this is a message from before the flood, but it comes from an eyewitness who wrote it down. Like the *Odyssey*, this is the tale of a returning traveler, a voyager into the unknown, skilled in many things; but Odysseus writes nothing, nor does he build great walls. Gilgamesh is a writing poet and hence is also a builder of monuments, an erector of walls, and an encloser of sacred spaces. Odysseus is still an oral poet: his inscriptions, such as his bed and his scar, are secret and hidden; but he is willing to tell his tale to the Phaeacians and to tell it again to Penelope.

The *Odyssey*'s refusal to present us with a great *sêma* for its hero may then be of a piece with its refusal to present itself as text. Like the *Iliad*, it insists that there is no conspicuous sign that embodies its hero’s career. In fact, the *Odyssey* includes its own version of the Achaean wall, a story of a barrier that accounts for the breach between the world narrated in the poem and the world in which the poem is heard. This is the mountain referred to in books 8 through 12, which will be in effect a wall, cutting off the Phaeacians from the outer world and cutting us off from the fairy world of the past. This “wall” is one to be erected rather than destroyed, but it

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54Translation, Pritchard (1954) 73. For thematic comparisons with the *Odyssey*, see Gresseth (1975).
has the same purpose of severing us from direct, tangible contact with these fabulous sailors who had in the past touched the shores of Greece in their ships “swift as thought.”

We first hear of it from Alcinous who recalls a prophecy as Odysseus sails off. It said that Poseidon would be angered at the Phaeacians for all their painless ferrying of men across the sea and would one day strike a ship as it was returning to port and “cover over” (amphikalupsein) their city with a mountain, either crushing or blockading it (8.565–569). As with the Achaean wall, the punishing god is Poseidon, and again he fears a loss of his honor (13.128–138). Again Zeus reassures him and bids him to do what he will (13.140–145). As the ship returns from its mission and approaches port, Poseidon turns it into stone and roots it to the ground (13.161–164). The sequel is in suspense: we leave the Phaeacians recalling that prophecy and preparing a sacrifice to avert the predicted mountain. Whatever the outcome, the Phaeacians will be cut off from the rest of the world, for Alcinous vows to stop ferrying mortals (13.180–181). The cutting off of Phaeacia has the same function as the destruction of the Achaean wall: both may be said to forestall objections of the simpleminded, and both put the scene of heroic action in an inaccessible place.⁵⁵ In the case of these great sailors, Homer’s audience might have expected them to put in on their shores any day. (Their magic ships are the equivalent in the epic imagination of UFOs.) But now they understand that these highly civilized people will not make contact with them. In the Odyssey, this breaking of connection with the epic world is accompanied by the production of a great artifact: Zeus tells Poseidon to “make [the ship] stone as it approaches, / in the shape of a swift ship, so that all men may marvel at it” (13.156–157). But this god-made artifact arrests motion, and marks not the crossing over to Phaeacia but the loss of that possibility.

Like the Iliad, then, the Odyssey has no particular love for rolling up its hero under a monumental tomb and, in what I take to be a related attitude, insists on a radical break between the heroic land-

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⁵⁵The parallel is drawn in the scholia; cf. Heubeck, West, Hainsworth on Od. 6.8 and on 7.45, with additional parallels between the pallisaded walls of the Phaeacians and the “town wall” fortifications imposed on the Achaean wall. Also discussed by Scodel (1982) 48–50.
scape and the ground where we, the audience, live and hear the tale. There was, however, something solid brought back from Phaeacia; after all Odysseus came back, and not empty-handed. Having been stripped of all he won at Troy and even what he wore when he washed up in Phaeacia, he yet made good his loss and came away with many gifts, the most impressive being thirteen excellent tripods. Odysseus takes care to preserve these when he lands in Ithaca and puts them in a magical cave of the Nymphs:

And in it are wine bowls and two-handled jars made of stone, where bees deposit their honey. And in it are large stone looms where the Nymphs weave their garments, a marvel to see; and water ever flowing

[Odyssey 13.105–109]

Two paths lead into this cave, one for mortals and one for the gods (13.109–112). Such apparently gratuitous details have made this passage a favorite target for allegorizing readers of Homer, especially Neoplatonists, who would find treated here a favorite theme, the incarnate soul. Since their methods have been said to approach the kind of structural analysis I have been employing in this chapter, it may be worthwhile to distinguish my method here from strict allegorism. In an allegory, each literal detail must be taken as pointing to an aspect of a coherent doctrine behind the tale. Individual details find their ultimate coherence and significance only when referred to this unexpressed doctrine. But in the view of Homeric unity I arrived at in Chapter 2, any single and total hidden order must be left outside of epic. Nevertheless, such details as the poet does mention are given as parts of a world and so can be assigned value and “meaning” in their relation to the structure of all things in that world. In this chapter I have been reading significance into certain objects and artifacts in the poems not as symbolic parts to be totalized in some recondite doctrine but simply as parts of a world that distinguishes between human and divine artifacts and between temporary and lasting ones. I have read each detail not only as an item in the plot but also as an item in an inventory of all the objects there are in heaven and earth. In
trying to define writing, a thing of interest to us as readers and theorists, I have been collecting instances of human and divine signs and works as functional analogues to *sēmata*. I hope I can continue to avoid a rampant ly abusive allegorism if I add the forms of art in this cave, whose significance for my theme has been made plain by the poet’s careful deposition of Odysseus’s material trophies there. Thus if we examine these objects both as elements of the plot and as instances of artifacts, we may see in them a special idea of artifacts, an idea that bears on the relationship of mortal works of art to the divine.

The cave of the Nymphs is by its two roads undeniably a place where the eternal meets the ephemeral, but its contents are not the elements of a Platonic soul but rather the appurtenances of civilized life, ideally immortalized. In the shapes of these stalactites and stalagmites the poet sees the the tools and trappings of festivity—wine and water, fine garments—made fixed and permanent but without loss of function. Here the instruments of art are solid as stone, and yet divinities may weave on them and bees fill them with sweetness. In this "marvelous cave" (13.363) one might lay hold of an artifact that is "made," that is stone somehow rendered functional, but is also eternal and divine. Perhaps only here, where the stream never fails, might one speak of a visible, unaging poetry playing among the festivity and skillful joining. In this place of divine art, at once solid and eternal, Odysseus deposits the goods from the Phaeacians. Yet for all his scrupulous materialism (he counts his goods up to make sure none are missing [13.218]), we do not hear that he returned to fetch them. What might have been trophies and proofs of his incredible adventures will apparently end up as dedications in a hidden shrine.

But it seems that the Greeks returned for them sometime later. Archaeology has identified a cave of the Nymphs on Ithaca.56 It was a place of cult from the bronze age into the first century C.E. At some time Odysseus came to be honored there, for a terra-cotta mask of the second or first century B.C.E. identifies itself as a votive to Odysseus. And here too have been found thirteen (and only

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thirteen) bronze tripod cauldrons whose design suggests a date of the ninth or eighth century B.C.E. The thirteen is certainly suggestive of the title of tripods that Alcinous exacted from his twelve princes, to which he added his own (Od. 8.387ff., 13.13). It may be that Homer was touting a local antiquity here or that some entrepreneurs after Homer contrived an attraction for the large audience of the Odyssey. In either case the trophies of Odysseus, buried along with these stone devices, attests to the thirst to find a hard trace of the magic of the past and an instinct that the poet will direct us to it.

Like the Iliad then, the Odyssey lets its audience know that they can expect no unmediated contact with the heroic world through any physical thing. In place of Odysseus’s grave we are given the ambiguous oar, a wandering signifier, never at home until it is misread; the imaginary realm of Phaeacia, land of the supreme travelers, is blockaded; we cannot reach it except through the tales of the wanderer, though some may claim to have found traces of it in a cave full of stone cups and looms we cannot use. The Odyssey prefers the telling of tales to the reading of history in objects; it prefers keeping its hero in constant motion to incorporating him into a chef d’oeuvre. Its hero’s kleos will not be carried in any tomb, however splendid, but is already reaching heaven as its hero lives and moves and extends it himself; his fame resides in performance and action, not inscription.

Each poem avoids closure, the fixing of fame by mortal means, once and for all, though each does so in a different way: if the Iliad wreaks destruction on the presumptive sign, the Odyssey casts off possible final signs lightly, always deferring its hero’s coming to rest under a clear and stable mark of his fame. Odysseus is a great signified, his name written in his flesh, who must journey far and be stripped of all before he comes back to his rightful name and identity. Along the way we hear that tombs may be cenotaphs, empty signs of glory, and unheroic Elpenor has more of a grave than the hero. The Iliad warns us that signs can be destroyed and moved from their proper place and that no sign satisfactorily embodies kleos; it erases any possible concrete sign, whereas the Odyssey declines to show us a final sign.

As in my investigation of the different strategies by which the
two poets achieved vividness, the *Odyssey* assumes the problematic of the *Iliad* and exacerbates it to find a new freedom. Whereas the *Iliad* had denied that it was a later song, the *Odyssey* won a different kind of earliness by insisting on its own lateness, or the priority of song to deed. A similar victory is won from near defeat in evading fixity, limitation, and unchangingness: the *Iliad* denies the powers of fixity; the *Odyssey* fixes the *Iliad* and entombs Achilles but refuses to bury its own. In this refusal is a kind of freedom that the *Iliad* does not have. The almost irresponsible wildness of the *Odyssey* in regard to truth and tale-fixing monuments may make the *Iliad* seem slow and awkward as it almost trips over the objects in the ground and has to battle them; they seem to resist it as it makes its own world appear. The *Odyssey*, delighting in fictions, throws up too many signs of Odysseus and points out that there can be signs with nothing beneath. The resourcefulness of the *Odyssey* is impressive, though it may seem a resourcefulness imposed on it by the achievement of its too, too solid predecessor. Without adjudicating between the poems on this point we may at least say that *Odyssey* succeeds on its own terms, to make the newest song that rings in men’s ears. Its leap beyond any possibility of leaving written texts behind is a great cast, like Odysseus’s discus throw on Phaeacia: “Even a blind man might distinguish your sēma / just by touching it, since it is not mixed in with the throng of the others” (8.195–196).

The Poet and the Work of Art

Before concluding, I should note that my reading has been directly contrary to one sympathetic view of Homeric poetry which sees the poet as extolling his artistry in his poems and celebrating his craftsmanlike powers of making. On such a view, mastering and fixing the variable oral form is the poet’s triumph, not his fear, and a more appropriate symbol in the *Iliad* of its own making would be the great shield that Hephaestus forges for Achilles, so lovingly described in book 18.57 Indeed, one must agree that the

57E.g., Reinhardt (1961) 401–411, who concludes: “Since poetry is a craft, we expect craftsmanship of the poet, corresponding to his profession” (“Da nun
artisanal conception of making is idealized in this shield, on which Hephaestus "made many curious designs with his knowing ingenuity" (18.482). But I have noted in Chapter 1 that the epic poets eschew the artisanal vocabulary for their own practices, and it is far from clear that this artifact would have been an adequate analogue of the singer's art.

It is beyond doubt that the shield of Achilles is an ideal, even magical artifact, but it also precisely transcends the limits of any mortal construction in the same way that Hephaestus's mechanical handmaids transcend statuary. And it is true that Hephaestus uses his art to represent much of the same world as the Iliad does, but like the Sirens, he also includes much more. If the immense Iliad spans only the time that Hector lived and Achilles raged, what text could ever hope to be so vast as the shield, depicting both war and peace, encompassing the earth, sea, and stars, circumscribed only by Ocean? This is finally an uncanny making that the poet cannot hope for. The shield transcends even the limits of its plastic form: the engraved scenes incorporate motion, process, and sound: the furrows on a plowed field "turn to black, although they were gold, such an exceptional marvel this was" (18.548–549); when a boy sings a harvest song, the engraving somehow communicates that it is "on a clear lyre, charmingly, with a delicate voice" (18.569–571). The verdict of Achilles is definitive: "My mother, the god has given such arms as are fitting to be the work of immortals, and not for a mortal man to have accomplished" (19.21–22). The shield is so splendid that the mere sight of it stirs fear not only in the Trojans but in Achilles' own men as well, who cannot bear to look at it directly and avert their eyes, trembling (20.44–46, 19.14–15). No less powerful is its effect on the goddess's son: when he sees it anger rises in him and an answering gleam flashes out from his own eyes (19.15–19). The shield is perhaps a paean to the metalworker, not the singer, and not to the beauty of his work but to its superhuman limits.

A measure of the unapproachable also surrounds an artful im-

Dichten Handwerk ist, so wird vom Dichter Handwerkliches, seinem Beruf Entsprechendes erwartet" [410]; Marg, using an earlier form of Reinhardt's chapter, carries the idea to allegorical extremes (1957) 21–37; see too Schadewaldt (1965) 352–374.
plement in the *Odyssey* that Jasper Griffin has suggested may stand for the *Iliad* as text: it is the golden baldric of Heracles, wrought with scenes of war. The object seems to dismay Odysseus. When he encounters it in the underworld, he cries, “May the one who fashioned it never fashion another one, / the one that laid up that baldric in his art [*technē*]” (*Od.* 11.613–614). Griffin richly suggests that Odysseus’s just-preceding encounter with Achilles was symbolically a brush with his poem, so that his comment implies a judgment that the *Iliad* was “a marvelous creation . . . yet grim and terrifying, immoderate, never to be repeated.”58 Perhaps I am too literal here, but I take this artifact to refer not to the *Iliad* but to some saga of Heracles, a hero even earlier and more savage than Achilles; accordingly, his baldric is golden, not silver like that on the later hero’s shield (*II.* 18.480). In any case, if these admirable artifacts are in some ways like ideal poems, they are decidedly beyond human making and even endurance. An apocryphal story from the “Roman” *Life of Homer*, which seems to derive from the description of the shield, reads it well: Homer went to Achilles’ tomb and prayed for the hero to appear to him in his splendid armor; when Achilles appeared, Homer was blinded by the gleam of the arms, and Thetis and the Muses compensated him with the gift of poetry.59 It is only after turning away from such marvelous fabrications that singers become singers.

In this chapter I have sought in the texts moments of self-reflection on the part of those still-capable poets through whom they came to be written. I have found that, though writing is generally banished from the heroic world, each poem has a great deal to say about signs and in particular about their limitations as a way of preserving fame. In view of the fact that in its one reference to writing the *Iliad* calls it “signs,” I have read the stories of heroic signs as insisting on the superiority of singing to making, an attitude that seems consonant with the presentation of the poem as song rather than text. Even if the passages that I have suggested refer to the poems as monumental texts be regarded as implausibly self-conscious, there remains through both poems a recurrent

59Wilamowitz-Mollendorff (1903) 31. Cf. Burkert (1985) 207, who refers to a story reported by Herodotus (6.117) in which a man is blinded by the epiphany of a hero.
theme of the failure or loss of physical artifacts and a suspicion of the hope of fixing things for good.

I do not deny that we may think of those who finally made the Iliad and Odyssey as artists, or that they might have eagerly acceded to the new technology and created or helped create these texts. But whatever the original purposes of the texts—to be aids in performance, memoranda, or precious objects—they could not have immediately usurped the older conception of poetry as singing, not making. The poet of the Iliad and the Odyssey, when greeted with a pen or face-to-face with his amanuensis, certainly acceded to this new sign making, but not without misgiving, or rather, not without reserving for his oral art a separate place that could not be usurped by the scribe. As those texts were made they incorporated a warning that no mortal making could produce a complete and adequate embodiment of this art as it had been and continued to be practiced. Even this public art—apparently so open, declaring itself flatly and without hidden meanings to its people—retains reservations about being completely appropriated. These are the reservations of an art that exists and is “made” only when it is being given to its audience, one that is unwilling to be reduced to other arts, especially to monumental makings. In recent times critics have been able to locate a form of literary resistance similar to this, a resistance on the part of texts ever to yield up a final meaning, whether because of the ungovernability of writing or the aporias of criticism. In Homer we may see an early form of this reserve of meaning in the singer’s resistance to the stone carver and inciser, even as his special presentation of the past undergoes a passage into inscribed lines. Nietzsche’s apothegm may well be profoundly right: “How Classicists torment themselves with the question whether Homer could write without grasping the much more important principle that Greek art exhibited a long inward hostility to writing and did not want to be read.”60