CHAPTER FIVE

HOMERIC SIGNS AND FLASHBULB MEMORY

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In recent years, scholars have paid considerable attention to Homeric semata. Gregory Nagy has examined the relationship between sêma and noesis in archaic hexameter poetry, seeing a parallelism between the intelligence required to encode and to decode signs.¹ Andrew Ford discusses the grave marker as a foil for poetry; like epic song, it can preserve fame, but it is liable to be destroyed, or moved, or to lose its meaning.² Thus, for Ford, the sêma helps us see how Homer does not treat his song as a fixed monument. C. Sourvinou-Inwood argues that 'The primary type of reference in the signs referred to as sêma is indexical; but the indexical reference slides into a symbolic one which is more pronounced in some types of sêmata and less so in others': that is, they function as parts of the greater whole to which they point, but also convey messages.³ Haun Saussy sees Odysseus' scar as a form of writing that Eurycleia reads.⁴ Deborah Steiner also has discussed Homeric signs as antecedents of writing, noting especially that the reader of a sign must perform a double intellectual task, first recognizing that the sign is a sign, and then interpreting it.⁵ On this basis, she very helpfully distinguishes signs recognizable as signs only to those who have special preparation to understand them from signs based on established conventions, so that anyone can potentially see them as signs and try to interpret them. The first are 'inferential', the second 'semiological'.

J.M. Foley has placed signs in relation to ‘traditional referentiality’. He argues that *semata* have to be interpreted metonymically, for they reach outside the poem itself to signal an emerging reality. Thus, in his view, signs generally (and not just grave markers) stand for epic itself and the process of its reception. Only the person competent in the traditional register can understand them. Indeed, *sēma* is a central term in his *Homer's Traditional Art*.

Although this chapter will examine one group of signs, the recognition signs of the *Odyssey*, their peculiarities are much clearer within the context of a more general discussion of the Homeric sign, and more significant as they cast light on this wider context. The sign that permits Penelope’s recognition of Odysseus, in particular, is potentially relevant both to the ‘Penelope question’ that has been important in recent scholarship and to the older debate about the authenticity of the recognition scene. Understanding these signs thus has significant interpretive consequences in itself, and the way Homeric characters use signs, furthermore, offers insights into Homeric psychology.

The sign, however, is also central to our understanding of the background to literacy. The only allusion to writing in the epics is, of course, the ‘nasty signs’ on Bellerophon’s tablet (*Iliad* 6.168): if the Greeks placed the technology of writing, when they acquired it, into an intellectual frame of reference constituted by traditional signs, understanding that framework should help us understand how they understood writing. Interpreters have tended to emphasize those aspects of the sign that correspond to modern semiotic thought—signs are coded messages. Such an understanding of sign can easily be transferred to writing, as a further code. Such a model can account for most Homeric signs. However, recognition signs have a very strong affective component that models of encoding and decoding do not sufficiently emphasize.

All *semata* have in common that they point beyond themselves—that is what makes them signs. Not all Homeric signs are the same,

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