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Tying Up Loose Ends: The Metapoetics of Closure in *Odyssey* 22

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When we read Book 22 of the *Odyssey* we feel that we have reached an end-point.[1] Just as the narrative of the *Iliad* seems to move inexorably toward the highly-anticipated meeting between Hector and Achilles in *Iliad* 22, so too our anticipation of Odysseus' triumph over the suitors – the moment he reclaims his *oikos* – provides the momentum that propels the first twenty-two books. But insofar as it is a climax it is also a deflation. As W.B. Stanford notes, in Books 23 and 24 'we are made to feel that the supreme crisis is past: the turbulence is only such as follows a storm.'[2] Book 22 (the *Mnesterophonia*) occupies an awkward place in the narrative; it is an end-point but it is not the end of the poem. I argue that the poet, mindful of Book 22's narrative weight, calls attention to an end that is not *The End* and in so doing calls attention to the poem's persistent resistance to closure, even in a book that is preoccupied with the very *idea* of closure.

In this paper I demonstrate how, in anticipating the end of the *Odyssey*, the poet (1) represents binding and other acts of tying, closing, and delimiting as parallel with the process of concluding a poem; (2) connects narrative space with physical space; and (3) poses epic poetry as an art without end. Ultimately, I argue that the poet dramatises his relationship to his own text – and, possibly, to changing conceptions of the text – through these scenes of binding that I discuss. As I suggest in conclusion, the *Odyssey*

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[1] That is, the position in the poem occupied by Book 22, the *Mnesterophonia*. Its division into a separate unit is irrelevant for my argument; however, it will be convenient to maintain the modern nomenclature, since the scenes I discuss are for the most part narrated in Book 22. I use the word 'book' loosely throughout the paper to refer to the *Mnesterophonia*. For different views on the debate about the origin of book divisions see West 1988: 39-40; Jensen 1980: 88-9; Taplin 1992: 285-293; Olson 1995: 228-239; Nagy 1996: 88
[2] Stanford 1996: 371.

is a 'transitional text,'[3] and its poet is in fact acutely aware of its transitional status and of the difficulty of providing a fixed form to a hitherto indeterminate tradition.

The poet envisions the suitors' demise in terms of binding. In the opening lines of the book he explains that 'the ropes of destruction had been fastened to each one of them' (ὀλέθρου πείρατ᾽ ἐφῆπτο, 22.33).[4] Not ten lines later, Odysseus echoes the poet's words: 'now the ropes of destruction have been fastened to each one of you (ὀλέθρου πείρατ᾽ ἐφῆπται, 22.41).[5] The lexical duality of the word translated here as 'rope' (πεῖραρ) is consistent with the point I hope to make throughout the paper: the poem links, but ultimately fails to equate, binding and closure. πεῖραρ denotes both 'rope' (that is, a means of binding) and 'limit' or 'end'–whether of time, space, activity, or literary work.[6] Its Attic form, πέρας, is famously used by Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus to mark the end of the *Odyssey*.[7] When the poet and Odysseus say that the *peirata* of destruction are bound to the suitors, they pose the act of binding as one also of completion. And indeed this makes a good deal of sense: to bind something is to impose upon it spatial limits, and to do so is to render it, in a sense, complete.

After the boldest of the suitors are slain, Melanthius hurries to bring arms to his comrades. When Eumaeus spots Melanthius in the storeroom, he asks Odysseus whether he ought to kill him outright or bring him out for Odysseus to punish. Odysseus has something else in mind: wrap up (ἀποστρέψαντε) his hands and feet, throw him into

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[3] Friedrich explains: '[The Homeric epics] behave neither as oral nor as literate texts. […] This leaves them in limbo, but only seemingly so: for we can give this limbo a habitation and a name. It is that yet uncharted territory between orality and literacy: the site of the transitional text' (Friedrich 2002: 65). Albert Lord famously denied the possibility of a transitional text in *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 1960: 124-38). While he ultimately accepted the possibility of a transitional text (in *The Singer Resumes the Tale*), he nevertheless maintained his belief that the category did not apply to the Homeric epics. See Lord 1960: 124-38; Lord 1968; Lord 1995: 212-37. For other views, see Friedrich 2002; Parry 1966.

[4] For the precise logic of the metaphor, with Iliadic parallels, see Fernandez-Galiano 1988: 226. He notes, 'The causal, defining sense ("that which binds") is crossed with the idea of "the boundary of death" (τέλος θανάτοιο, as Odysseus puts it in his prediction to Antinous, xvii 476) to give a play on words: each suitor is already bound (ἐφῆπτο) by the cable-end which ties him to his end in death. Büchner also suggests an allusion to the tying of the two ends of the rope from which the suitors will be (metaphorically) hung.'

[5] νῦν ὑμῖν καὶ πᾶσιν ὀλέθρου πείρατ᾽ ἐφῆπται.

[6] For a full discussion, see Bergen 1975.

[7] Ἀριστοφάνης δὲ καὶ Ἀρίσταρχος πέρας τῆς Ὀδυσσείας τοῦτο ποιοῦνται (scholiast at 23.296, ed. Dindorf 1855). Some manuscripts, however, read 'τέλος'. See Wender 1978: 10-12.

the storeroom, tightly bind boards behind him (σανίδας δ' ἐκδῆσαι),[8] bind a twisted rope from him (σειρὴν δὲ πλεκτὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ πειρήναντε), and draw him up a high pillar, to the rafters (22.173-6). Having obeyed his orders, Eumaeus tells Melanthius that he will remain there to 'watch over the night all the way through' (22.195). And so, the narrator reports, he was left there, stretched out in painful bond and the shining door was shut upon him (22.200-1).

The image recalls a famously metapoetic scene: Odysseus' binding on the mast near the island of the Sirens. There, Odysseus demands his companions to bind (δήσατ᾽) him to the upright mast in a painful bond (δεσμῷ…ἐν ἀργαλέῳ), attach cables from him (ἐκ αὐτοῦ πείρατ᾽ ἀνήφθω), and fasten him tighter with more bonds (πλεόνεσσι…ἐν δεσμοῖσι πιέζειν) if he demands to be released (λῦσαι, 12.160-4). Verbal resonances reinforce the connection; the rope with which Melanthius is bound, 'σειρὴν' (22.175), is identical in form to the melodious 'binders' Odysseus eludes, the Σειρῆνες.[9] Like Odysseus, Melanthius is bound to a tall mast-like pillar in order both to experience an extreme of human sensation and to witness a natural phenomenon. But Odysseus' binding is not limiting. The physical *peirata* that bind him allow him to cross over geographical and epistemological *peirata*. The poem, like Odysseus on the mast, is both bound and unbound in the Siren episode.[10] Even when constrained, whether by rope or by genre, neither Odysseus nor the *Odyssey* can be kept from exceeding its limits.[11] The binding of Melanthius, on the other hand, limits him in space and time. It is

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[8] Intriguingly, the word for the boards on which Melanthius is bound, σανίδες, is used – at least as early as the fifth century – to denote writing tablets or public billboards (LSJ A6). A chorus in Euripides' *Alcestis* refers to Thracian tablets inscribed with ancient writing (Θρήσσαις ἐν σανίσιν, τὰς / Ὀρφεία κατέγραψεν, 957-8). If this meaning was active as early as the composition of the *Odyssey*, Melanthius would effectively serve as the text upon a billboard.

[9] '[The Sirens] were (like Circe and Calypso) "detainers." Their name (*seirenes*) may be derived from *seira*, a thong or rod' (Pocock 1959: 111). The Sirens are, quite literally, 'binders.' Odysseus must be temporarily bound to the mast to elude the Sirens' fatal 'binding.' See also Plat. *Crat.* 403c-d, where Socrates puns on the etymology of Σειρῆνες to link them with the δεσμὸς in the underworld. For a discussion of the etymology of Σειρῆνες, see Pucci 1998: 8, note 13.

[10] Consider, for example, the late sixth century Attic black-figure oinochoe, where Odysseus' unboundedness in the Sirens scene is depicted literally. The artist represents Odysseus with two sets of arms, one bound to the mast, the other gesticulating to the Sirens (Nr. 253 in Berlin's Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen). See Nelis 1995: 179.

[11] For a full discussion of the Iliadic allusions in the Siren episode, see Pucci 1998.

as if the poet tries to treat the body of Melanthius in such a way as he cannot treat his own poem.

When the door closes on Melanthius, it seems the poet closes the door on his story as well. However, in a way that is characteristic of 'narrative ends' in the *Odyssey*, the poet concludes Melanthius' story only to reopen it shortly thereafter.[12] Well before sunrise Odysseus reopens the door on Melanthius and 'releases' him in more than one sense. Melanthius is figuratively deprived of his senses. His binding renders his limbs useless, and his isolation in the dark storeroom renders his senses equally useless. His figurative sensory deprivation becomes literal when he is led outside and loses his nose, ears, genitals, hands, and feet (22.474-7).

In his dismemberment, literary-critical terms are reflected literally upon the canvass of Melanthius' body. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discerns two processes at work in poetic creation: *desis* and *lusis*, complication (*com-plico*) and resolution (*re-solvo*), or more literally, binding and loosening (*Poet.*, 1455b). A poet, according to Aristotle, must weave a complication (*desis*) into his plot and later unravel the knot (*lusis*). For Aristotle, writing a poem is analogous to tying, untying, weaving and unraveling. Melanthius' literal binding on the pillar is followed by the *lusis* of the ropes that bind him and the subsequent *lusis* of his limbs. As in a work of literature, this *lusis* implies his *telos*.[13] In anticipating the impossibility of closure for its own end, the poem figures Melanthius as a literal 'body' of literature. Even when Melanthius, a character whose presence has no necessity for the plot, is literally bound up (πειρήναντε) and closed off (θύρην ἐπιθέντε, 22.192-201), still his narrative has not reached its *peirar* until pitiless bronze renders him immobile and unable to reproduce or communicate. At the moment just before Melanthius is seized and bound in the storeroom, the narrator describes the shield he

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[12] Episodes in the *Odyssey* frequently end only to recur shortly thereafter. Some examples: (1) Odysseus disembarks from Circe's island in Book 11, as if for once and for all, but must return to bury Elpenor in Book 12. (2) Odysseus sails from Aeolia with the bag of winds, but crash-lands right back on Aeolia's shore 55 lines later. (3) Odysseus must evade Scylla and Charybdis twice. (4) As I will discuss later, and as Alexandrian editors pointed out, the *Odyssey* seems to come to a fitting close within Book 23, but then Odysseus summarises his story for Penelope (and for us).
[13] Aristotle's other pervasive analogue for poetic composition, a living organism (ζῷον), provides another instructive framework for approaching metapoetry in the *Odyssey*.

has taken to defend himself, the shield Laertes had used as a young man. All but forgotten, it lies on the ground of the storeroom speckled with rust. The only other descriptor is that the 'seams (ῥαφαί) of the straps were unbound' (λέλυντο, 22.186). The unraveling shield is characteristic not only of the way in which Melanthius' narrative reopens at its seams, but indeed of the *Odyssey* as a whole.[14] While Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* is posed as an object crafted to completion, neither Melanthius' shield nor the *Odyssey* has such pretence to closure.[15] It should be noted that the word used for 'seams', ῥαφαί, is etymologically related to 'rhapsode'.[16] If it is the job of the ῥαψῳδός to stitch together words and traditions, then the *Odyssey*-poet – in contrast to the *Iliad*-poet – emphasises the artificiality of closure, the tendency of threads to come undone in spite of the artificer's efforts.

While Melanthius' narrative can, after all, find a *peirar*, Odysseus' cannot. As he tells Penelope, 'Not yet have we come upon the *peirata* of trials, but there will be measureless (ἀμέτρητος) toil still to come' (23.248-9). No matter how long the poem continues, the *peirata* of Odysseus' toils will exceed its limits. After all, his toil is destined to be ἀμέτρητος–that is, not only without end but without meter; so boundless are his trials that no poet could hope to craft them into the metered constraints of poetry.[17] The poet seems to call attention to the artificiality of closure on a poem so vast and part of a narrative and mythological tradition that is vaster still. By drawing attention to the idea of closure, the poet calls attention also to the poem's *in*conclusiveness.

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[14] It may also remind us of Penelope's shroud and the conclusion delayed thereby.

[15] Indeed, I would argue that the *Odyssey* poses itself in relation to the *Iliad* as though the *Iliad* were, like Achilles' shield, crafted to completion. For the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* is distinctive for its sense of finality and closure. The Sirens' Iliadic invitation to Odysseus 'to change poet and poem, and to return to be the character of the *Iliad*,' as Pucci notes, 'spells only death' (Pucci 1998: 5-6). For the *Odyssey*, the Iliadic tradition is (if we accept Pucci's argument) quite literally a kind of ossification (πολὺς δ᾿ ἀμφ᾿ ὀστεόφιν θὶς, 12.45).

[16] Nagy 1996: 83-91. I cannot agree with the position of Scheid and Svenbro, where it is argued that '*Il est donc impossible de savoir par ce biais si, pour Homère, la aoidé ou le "chant" était un tissu métaphorique*' (Scheid and Svenbro 1994: 120). While it may be 'impossible to verify' whether the poets of the Homeric poems conceived of weaving as an analog for poetic composition, the evidence is certainly suggestive. The weaving of Laertes' shroud, as I argue below, mirrors the compositional strategies of the *Odyssey*, and the shroud Helen weaves in *Iliad* 3, depicting scenes from the Trojan war (πολέας…ἀέθλους/ Τρώων θ᾿ ἱπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων/ οὕς ἕθεν εἵνεκ᾿ ἕπασχον ὑπ᾿ Ἄρηος παλαμάων), provides a *mise-en-abyme* for the poem. If not explicit, the connection between weaving and poetic composition in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is nevertheless rich.

[17] See Purves 2002: 151-152.

The poet's anxiety about the impossibility of ending his own poem finds its clearest parallel in Penelope. Just as the end of the poem seems to prolong its conclusion with false endings and new beginnings, and just as the subject of the *Odyssey* is 'measureless,' so too Penelope delays for three years the completion of the shroud, a work that is 'beyond measure' (περίμετρον, 19.140). Like the *Odyssey*, there cannot be a natural or intuitive limit for a woven shroud; its limit must necessarily be arbitrary. Thus Penelope could 'string along' the suitors for three years.[18] Even if she had not unraveled the shroud each night, she could have logically upheld her promise, for she tells them to remain until she 'fully completes' (ἐκτελέσω) the shroud.[19] But a shroud is complete only when the weaver decides to turn the thread back on itself. And despite Penelope's resistance to closure, there ultimately *is* a natural end-point for her art: the shroud is a burial covering for Laertes. And insofar as Laertes' life has a natural and definitive limit in time, so does the shroud, which must accompany him to the grave.[20] So while the closure of a life provides closure for the woven art, the shroud in turn provides closure to Laertes' life. We might think of the last lines of the *Iliad*, where the enshrouding and burial of Hector's body provide closure both to his life and to the poem.[21]

Penelope's method of weaving by day and unraveling by night expresses not only an artist's 'atelophobia,' it also imitates and reproduces the process by which epic poetry is made. As an improvisational art, epic poetry lives and dies in performance. And

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[18] See Purves 2006, esp. 17-8. Purves links Herodotus' account of Darius' method of telling time by untying knots on a leather strap (4.98) to Penelope's method of extending time by weaving: 'With the release of each woven knot on the shroud…Penelope suspends all of Ithaca in a form of narrative limbo for as long as her ruse goes undetected. […] Both plots "fail" to the extent that they set up a very simple structure (the weaving of a shroud; the untying of sixty knots) whose completion points to narrative closure (marriage and death; conquest), but which in fact, inadvertently or not, serve to complicate or divert the plot's resolution' (17-8).

[19] Lowenstam 2000 discusses Penelope's guile in detail. Intriguingly, Penelope's method of delaying conclusions seems to be both a woven and *written* art: to pacify the suitors, Penelope insincerely sends them encouraging messages (ἀγγελίας προϊεῖσα, 2.92; 13.381). While ἀγγελία does not necessarily denote writing, it often implies it (Hdt. 2.114; 3.69; 3.122.1; 3.122.3; 5.14). Is Penelope writing letters?

[20] See *Od.* 2.96-101; 19.142-5; 24.131-7.

[21] καὶ τά γε χρυσείην ἐς λάρνακα θῆκαν ἑλόντες
πορφυρέοις πέπλοισι καλύψαντες μαλακοῖσιν.
αἶψα δ' ἄρ' ἐς κοίλην κάπετον θέσαν, αὐτὰρ ὕπερθε
πυκνοῖσιν λάεσσι κατεστόρεσαν μεγάλοισι. (*Il.* 24.795-8)

because oral performance is improvisational and therefore not perfectly reproducible, epic poetry can have no *telos*. It is in perpetual flux, a constant state of *desis* and *lusis*, undone (i.e., forgotten) in the moment of its creation. It is like a shroud that is continuously woven but never completed.

Unlike an oral performance, weaving is a spatial art with spatial limitations. I would suggest, though, that the poet's acute awareness of space in Book 22 corresponds with his awareness of the poem's sheer size. In a certain sense the poem becomes claustrophobic as it begins to consider its own end. The world of the poem shrinks dramatically once Odysseus lands in Ithaca in Book 13, and diminishes more or less continuously until Book 22. Interior spaces are described in greater detail and play a more prominent role here than anywhere else in the *Odyssey*. The opening of the book is an illustrative image: Odysseus stands in the threshold of the *megaron*, blocking the main exit (22.2). The only other point of access is a backdoor (ὀρσοθύρη) that leads into an alleyway (λαύρην).[22] It is located at the very back of the room and tightly fitting doors enclose it (22.126-8). The entrance to this alleyway is not only 'difficult to navigate through' (ἀργαλέον), it is also blocked off by the swineherd (22.129-37).[23] A poem that has for so long existed on the *eschata* of the world has shrunk to the size of a cramped and enclosed room. Odysseus' battle with the suitors recalls Iliadic style and language, but the battlefield has shrunk such that spears stick in walls, doors, and doorposts (22.275-6).[24] By the end of the scene, the suitors resemble sardines in a can, 'heaped upon one another' like fish in a net (22.384-389).[25]

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[22] For detailed discussion of the spatial arrangement of Odysseus' house as described here, see Merry 1878 (*Od.* 22.126) and Stanford 1954 (*Od* 22.126-9).

[23] Monro (1901) *ad loc.*: 'It was so narrow that one man could bar the passage into the courtyard.'

[24] Fernandez-Galiano takes this as a sign of poor poetic craftsmanship. He notes that while the poet 'decided to round off Odysseus' home-coming with an Iliadic-style spear battle,' he was not "able to give the story the twist of suspense, partly because the narrow stage on which his characters fight leaves little room for an exciting battle' (Fernandez-Galiano 1988: 207). While I disagree with this assessment, the important point for us is to recognise how palpably claustrophobic Book 22 becomes, especially when compared with the openness of the Iliadic battlefield.

[25] Indeed, even scholiasts seem to have felt the restriction of space in this book. The hypothesis to Book 22 (according to codices Q and V) describes the book as 'ἡ τῶν σωμάτων συγκομιδή', the heaping up of bodies.

I suggest that we can read the poet's preoccupation with enclosure metapoetically. For a poem in which travel and poetry are linked so inextricably, the end of travels would seem to signal the end of poetry as well. Without travel, a protean art form would seem to ossify.[26] When Odysseus lands on Ithaca in Book 13, his travels, and therefore the mainstay of the poem and the *nostoi* tradition, end. By Book 22, travel becomes impossible. All exits are sealed, and any attempt to traverse them means death. Victims are tied up, hemmed in, deprived of their extremities and executed.

The final end-point of Odysseus' *nostos* is also the poem's most prominent symbol of fixedness–the bed.[27] Odysseus' description of the bed's construction points to a shift that occurs in the narrative as the poem draws to its conclusion: skills that in the earlier books of the poem allowed Odysseus to open up the borders of the world are in the later books employed to close it off. His account of the bed's construction, Dougherty notes, 'evokes Odysseus' construction of his raft with all its metapoetic possibilities.'[28] And as in the account of the raft's construction, the narrator highlights skills required by an oral poet. But these skills are here employed to create – not a mobile craft – but an immovable bed.[29] While the account of the raft's construction highlights the process of *creation*, Odysseus' account of the bedroom's construction emphasises *closure and completion*. He reports how he 'enclosed' (ἀμφιβαλὼν, 23.192) the tree with the chamber and 'fastened closely-fit doors upon it' (192-4). Twice he says that he worked 'until [he] completed it' (ὄφρ᾽ ἐτέλεσσα, 192, 199), and focuses as much on its

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[26] Although outside the scope of this brief study, I want to emphasise the quite literal implications of this phrase, 'protean art form'. The poet characterises Proteus as the embodiment of epic poetry's creative, malleable, and spontaneous ποίησις. Proteus, like epic poetry, can represent himself as anything (πάντα δὲ γιγνόμενος πειρήσεται, ὅσσ᾽ ἐπὶ γαῖαν/ ἑρπετὰ γίγνονται, 4.417-8). He seems to be specifically linked with the *nostos* poet, as one who 'knows the depths of the sea' and knows how to tell 'the journey (ὁδὸν), the measures of the path (μέτρα κελεύθου), and the return (νόστον, 4.386-90).' For more on this, see Purves 2002: 152 and Rosen 1990. Significantly, Proteus' *nostos* narrative is only possible – that is, fixed and univocal – once he has been successfully bound by force (4.388; 4.419; 4.454-5), a process that comes with risks. In attempting to bind the ever variable Proteus, Menelaus must grapple with his infinitely variable forms; so too, the poet that attempts to fix the *Odyssey* into a single authorial version must grapple with the innumerable variants before a fixed and coherent version is possible.
[27] Zeitlin 1995: 118-20; 125-7.
[28] Dougherty 2001: 181.
[29] As Dougherty notes, 'The wreck of Odysseus' raft, the tool of his escape from Calypso's island and the symbol of his narrative powers, has now been rescued and reconstructed precisely to end the story. But instead of flexibility and mobility of the story in progress, this bed, fixed in the ground, offers an image of a tale that is finished' (Dougherty 2001: 181).

decoration as on its actual creation (ἔξεον, 199; δαιδάλλων χρυσῷ τε καὶ ἀργύρῳ ἠδ᾽ ἐλέφαντι, 200; φοίνικι φαεινόν, 201). The language of trimming, decorating, scraping down, and polishing seems akin to poetic composition, and in particular to the process of editing – that is, the process of producing a fixed text.

A similar inversion of earlier metapoetic imagery occurs in the execution scenes. Whereas ship's cables are used earlier in the *Odyssey* to join ship to port and culture to culture,[30] at the end of the poem they are figured as tools of separation. Telemachus hangs the disloyal servants not with just any rope, but specifically with the cable of a darkprowed ship (πεῖσμα νεὸς κυανοπρῴροιο, 22.465-7). In preparation for the massacre of the suitors, Philoetius binds the courtyard doors shut with 'a papyrus cable from a curved ship' (ὅπλον… βύβλινον, 21.390-1). The cable is not only nautical, but – perhaps – metatextual as well.[31] It is made of Egyptian papyrus, the very material that the Egyptians had used as a writing surface since at least 3000 BCE and the Greeks since at least the seventh century BCE.[32] Ships and ships' cables have hitherto opened the boundaries of the world; but by the end of the poem, nautical implements are fashioned into nooses that seal off the world. The skills that had previously enabled Odysseus to open up lines of communication are at the end of the poem useful to him only insofar as they allow him to limit the world of others.

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[30] e.g., 10.96, 10.127.

[31] While the precise mechanisms by which the *Odyssey* was put into writing are irrecoverable, the coincidence of dating is suggestive. For evidence of writing in Greece before the middle of the eighth century see Jeffery 1961, esp. 13-21; Bellamy 1989; Powell 1997: 18-32. See West 2011a for the inherently textual nature of the Homeric epics: 'the *Iliad* is a written text, and it should be self-evident that under ancient conditions there was no way in which a written text could come into existence without 'the aid of writing' (West 2011a: 10). The *Odyssey* is in my mind as much a product of writing as it is a product of oral poetics. See also West 2011b: 159-160, where he argues that 'it is highly probably that the *Iliad* at least was written down before the last quarter of the seventh century, because from that time on we find literary and pictorial allusions to its contents which presuppose that it was by then well known on both sides of the Aegean in a more or less fixed form; fixity implies writing.' Others, however, would deny the 'metatextual' possibility I have suggested. See, for example, Lord 1968; Jensen 1980; Nagy 1995.

[32] Emery 1938: 14; Roemer 2007: 84-94. The dating of Greek use of papyrus as a writing surface is contentious; for a full discussion see Lewis 1974: 84-94. By Herodotus' time, at any rate, the origins of Greeks' use of papyrus as a writing surface eluded historical memory. That the Ionians, according to Herodotus, continued to call books 'skins' 'even in ancient times' (ἀπὸ τοῦ παλαιοῦ) suggests the relative antiquity of the practice (5.58).

But Odysseus can only bring closure to the lives and worlds of *others*. Like the poet, Odysseus cannot hope to bring closure to his own story. The poet seems to speak through, and with, Odysseus when he recounts Teiresias' prophecy: 'Not yet have we come upon the *peirata* of struggles, but there will be measureless work (ἀμέτρητος πόνος) still to come' (23.248-9). Odysseus' story far exceeds the limits of the *Odyssey*, as there can be no natural end to an adaptation of a mythological tradition whose narrative has no discernible end. The end of the *Odyssey* offers multiple fitting endings, but poses them only to resist them. When at last Odysseus reunites with Penelope – when it seems, that is, that every narrative complication has been resolved[33] – Odysseus warns Penelope that they are yet far from their story's *peirata*.[34] And so, in a sense, the *Odyssey* begins all over again as Odysseus narrates his tales from beginning to end.[35]

While bedrooms, shrouds, storerooms, and bodies can be bound up, closed off, and completed, the *Odyssey* can have no such closure. Stories, the products of 'winged words,' cannot be fixed in time or space; they must move and evolve to suit time and place. In the last books of the *Odyssey*, the poet poses closure as a kind of ossification. Closure signifies death both to the individuals enclosed and to an art whose survival depends on adaptability.

I have demonstrated how the poet dramatises his own struggle to bring closure to a poem that resists conclusion, in an improvisational tradition that can have no end. I believe that the poet negotiates yet another closural pressure.[36] For centuries, we must imagine, the story of Odysseus' *nostos* existed not as a physical text but as a tradition – and a somewhat nebulous tradition at that.[37] Performances seem to have consisted of individual books or of select scenes recited in arbitrary order, at the whim of the

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[33] For the tenuous nature of this resolution, however, see Scott 1917; Stanford 1965; Purves 2002: 147.

[34] Purves 2006: 4-5; Purves 2002: 144-150; Scott 1917.

[35] See Thalmann 1984: 161-3.

[36] See West 2011b: 164, where he suggests that as a general rule, the first written recording of an oral poem is usually the product of an external stimulus.

[37] See, for example, Milman Parry's groundbreaking study, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (published posthumously), which demonstrates the traditional nature of Homeric poetry.

rhapsode or in accord with the will of the audience.[38] We know that by at least the 6th century motions were made toward the standardisation of the Homeric epics.[39] I would suggest that the end of the *Odyssey* is a dramatisation of the poet's attempt to negotiate the difficulty of providing formal and definitive closure to a tradition that has for centuries remained improvisational and open-ended. The poet who brought together the *Odyssey*, in other words, had to bind together a living poetic tradition and turn it into a *corpus*.

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[38] Jensen 2011: 167-178.
[39] Jensen 1980: 128-171; West 2011a: 74; West 2011b: 160; West 2001: 17-19. For ancient evidence, see Pl. *Hipparch.* 228b-229b; Lycurg. 102; D.L. I.57.

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