Orality and Literacy

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The socio-linguistic view on the categories of orality and literacy implies a fundamentally anthropological frame, which contrasts them as modes of culture considered as successive stages in the general evolution of mankind. The limit between them may be found in the invention of writing, and subsequently of technical ways that allow its permanency. It may explain why the invention of writing is often met in myths (in Greek myth, Cadmus was credited by Herodotus for introducing Phoenician letters into Greece, while he was searching his sister Europa, daughter of the king of Tyre or Sidon).

It is generally admitted that once a given culture knows writing, it does not go back to orality. However, Greece gives us a contrary example, the loss of writing. Mycenaean script (the syllabic linear B, 1600-1100 BCE) disappeared during the so called Dark Ages or Geometric period (1100-800 BCE), a time without writing, until the first items of a Greek alphabetical writing are known about 740 BCE with the Dipylon inscription, a short hexametric text dedicating the vessel it was inscribed on as a prize in a dancing competition, and Nestor's cup (see later).

This example may at least allow us to avoid a schematical judgment about the evolution, and too fast an approval of literacy as a value in itself. Besides, we may add that in a culture of literacy, numerous testimonies show people turning back to orality with a kind of nostalgia, as the myth of the Golden Age, since Hesiod, testifies, and as the three "heroes" chosen will show.

We must be very cautious with the fact that anthropology can interact with contemporary people who still live in Oral cultures, while for us, specialists of Antiquity and ancient languages, the access to ways of thinking is necessarily mediated through written texts, which may have influenced the contents, without allowing us to measure the deformations.

1. A moving border

Since the second half of twentieth century, specialists like Ruth Finnegan show that in most of the cases many intermediary stages separate Orality from Literacy. Literacy introduces itself more and more in a culture, probably because the political elites quickly understand they can take advantage of it for reinforcing their power. The disappearance of Mycenaean script coincides with the destruction of the Palaces: the accounts for the year, written on clay tablets were permanently fixed with the firing of the palaces, and thus accidentally preserved, though not meant for such a preservation. The tablets probably served political and economical interests.

Orality/Literacy appears therefore a fundamental polarity for ancient societies, one that does not hold to the objective date of the first texts, but rather to the stage of the concerned society: ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are literate societies in a much more ancient time than Greece. As the syllabic script used for the Mycenaean tablets did not fit the sounds of Greek language, it may be suspected that it was borrowed from older Linear A adapted to the pre-Greek language in use in Crete.

Sociologically speaking, literacy does not necessarily concern the whole of a given society: in Antiquity it was probably the property of a class of secretaries, scribes, in Egypt (as testifies a beautiful statue in the Louvre Museum) as well as Mycenae, contrasting with a generally illiterate population living in the Orality stage. But in a society where literacy becomes dominant, it seems that it brings important changes in the ways of thinking (Havelock 1963, 1973, 1986, Ong 1971, 1982, Goody 1977, 1993). Schematically summarized, the general evolution goes from an oral-aural apprehension of the world to a visual one.

Gregory Nagy (1996) applied Finnegan's remarks to the process of fixation of the text of Greek Epics, concluding that the Alexandian critics as Aristarchus are situated at the fifth stage of oral/written transmission.

Since the limit between orality and literacy is moving, unable to be grasped in History, orality is linked to the most ancient genres in culture, both Myths and Epics, themselves linked together in a mysterious way. In modern oral societies, it may be observed how Myths stand as a deep fundamental for explaining society itself, with many variations in telling them: thus we may suppose that the variations we know in Greek myths, such as they are told in Greek and Latin from Homer and Hesiod to Ps. Apollonius, Virgil, Ovid, etc., are due to ancient oral variations brought by former generations to their successors, until someone thought it useful to preserve one version through a written text.

In several ancient societies, Epics retained very ancient traditions about their own past, be it actual or partly imaginary. Though we do not know when and how they were written down, all of them stem from very old traditions, and sometimes preserve formulas and themes coming from a pre-historical common past, common to Indian Mahâbhârata and Greek epics, to Celtic songs or Slavic tales, etc. (see Durante, Schmitt, Watkins among the main specialists): it may imply that there were Indo-European epic traditions that went through oral traditional poetry until Sanskrit and Greek poetics preserved them through literate means until our times. The best example might be the formula we know in the Iliad for Achilles: he fights for winning an 'imperishable fame' (áphthiton kléos), and a parallel formula (sravas aksitam) is found in Sanskrit (Nagy 1979, Watkins 1995). This formula testifies that the genre of Epics corresponds to ideological contents in those ancient societies, at least among their elites, long before proper Literacy.

2. Three paradoxes of Literacy

In classical Greece, the history of ideas shows that almost in the same period of flourishing literacy we may state three paradoxical attitudes against it, which we will classify under the symbolic names of heroes/heroines:

-Antigone's paradox: in her opposition to Creon's power, Antigone in Sophocles' tragedy invokes the observance of unwritten laws, older and more sacred than the written human laws of the City.

-Pindar's paradox: the poet claims in his Epinicians (Odes for the victorious athletes in the Contests held in the four great Panhellenic sanctuaries of Delphi, Corinth, Nemea and Olympia) that poetry will last longer than statues and monuments, and that his own poems are thus superior to the athletes' achievements (athla). Therefore the poems symbolically enter into competition with the athletes. Actually many of those poems are still preserved –through literacy of course –, whereas we mostly ignore the names of the athletes of these periods except in Pindar's or Simonides' poems, and we have lost most of the stone monuments commemorating them.

-Socrates' paradox: the philosopher who was Plato's and Xenophon's master was suspicious towards writing, and though he was living in literate Athens, he constantly practised an oral teaching through dialogue with his pupils, without ever putting his thought into written form. Those pupils wrote their Socratic dialogues, thus trying to transcribe an oral discourse. Plato even developed in his own œuvre a philosophical dialogue between the Egyptian Theuth and Thamus about writing: Thamus argues against scripture and its dangers for memory, thus representing Socrates' position. For him, oral conversation allows a deeper reflection than writing. Plato's position against his master marks the evolution from Orality to Literacy in ancient Greece.

Antigone, Pindar, and Socrates were living in a literate world, but they stood up for oral speech as the deepest human feature, and therefore the most long-lasting.

3. The main features of Orality

Some formal features may be considered as characteristic of Orality, all of them met in the Homeric epics: though they cannot actually prove Homer's oral composition, they appear strong clues in this direction. All of them suppose an oral memory trained in a very different way from ours.

3.1. catalogues

The long enumeration of the Achaean ships, with their origin and heroes as their leaders, in book 2 of the Iliad, the best known of the Homeric catalogues, consists of an exhaustive list of items (the Greek verb katalégô exists in Homer, meaning 'to enumerate'). The Epics and Sapiential literature know other catalogues, such as the list of Nereids in Iliad 18 (less exhaustive than Hesiod's list of 50 Nereids), of Zeus' loves in Iliad 14, of the fighters killed in battles by a hero, of prizes given by Achilles to the winners in the funeral games in book 23, etc. Catalogues are indeed difficult to memorize, but as Minchin 2001 argues, they ought to be 'organized' with principles serving as landmarks for oral performance: the ship catalogue is a 'cognitive map' of Homeric Greece. When the poet asks for the Muse's help before beginning the Catalogue of ships, he both recognizes the difficulty and takes up the challenge.

3.2. genealogies

A genealogy may be considered a special case of a catalogue: a list of ancestors, ordered in time. Most of genealogies known in Greek epics stem from a god, and are orally claimed on the battlefield by a hero who is proud of his ancestors. He generally thinks that this glorious descent warrants him a victory, though the opposite warrior may claim even a more glorious one. Genealogies may be very long, as demonstrated by Aeneas' in Iliad 20.214-241, going back to the eighth generation (Zeus-Dardanos-Erichthonios-Trôs-Ilos-Laomedôn-Priamos-Hector on one side, Trôs-Assarakos-Kapys-Anchises-Aeneas on the other). One may suppose that such long genealogical traditions were kept orally only in the case of noble and especially royal lineage.

The epics also know some genealogies of objects that once belonged to important heroes, sometimes since they were fabricated by a god like Hephaistos or Athena, or by a hero like Daedalus, as Agamemnon's scepter and Nestor's cup in the Iliad, and Odysseus' bow in the Odyssey. Thus the objects have their history, and may survive people they once belonged to, sometimes beyond the Epics in other literary genres: Agamemnon's scepter appears in Aeschylus' Oresteia as one of the signs of the Atreids' evil; Achilles' scepter prolongs its life in Pindar's epinician odes, while his arms, after having been disputed between the Achaeans as the Nekuia in Odyssey 10 attests, give occasion to the quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus and to Ajax' suicide, in Sophocles' play and in vase paintings; Nestor's cup has provided a now well known epigraphical epigram found in an archaic grave in Pithekoussai (modern Ischia), which seems to attest that the Epics were diffused in Western Greek trading posts as early as ca. 730 BCE. This inscription in Euboean alphabet does not however prove that the Epics were then known in a written form: it may allude to oral hearsay in the symposium tradition, where wine, sex and wit were mixed without any clear link to the young boy the cup was buried with.

Far from beeing interludes in the narrative, lists and catalogues "are used at different times to regulate, to structure, and to colour the telling." (Minchin 2001:98)

3.3. typical scenes and formulas

It had been remarked since Antiquity that several repetitions occur in Homer, and it was generally considered a weakness, leading to marking many passages as suspect. Milman Parry analyzed the importance of repetitions in the formulas in 1928. Without the notion of formula, the German scholar Arend discovered in 1933 that some 'typical scenes' often recur when the characters are confronted to similar situations: for instance a visit and welcoming, preparing

oneself for fighting, the succession of events in the battle, etc. Parry wrote a review of Arend's work that paved the way to several studies in this common field of formulas and type-scenes or themes (Lord, Fenik), giving birth to the current called Oral-poetry: with the hypothesis that Orality was prevalent in the Homeric times, those repetitions changed their status from weaknesses to features of poetic composition deeply impregnated in the poetical devices of the time. For instance, in the type-scene of arming which occurs four times in the Iliad, for Paris, Agamemnon, Patroclus and Achilles, we have the same list of arms repeated four time with the same items in the same order. The interest for the audience may come from the slight variations in each of them (see Formulaic Style/language).

3.4. similes

One of the most characteristic features of the Homeric Epics is the frequency of long similes that show how the poets conceived the world as full of analogies: as long the narrative goes on, similes from several fields of reference (animals, wild nature, human crafts like house or shipmaking, farmworking, celestial and meteorological phenomena, trees, etc.) go along with the narrative, giving visual, auditory and more generally all kinds of perceptive impressions. Thus the quotidian world of the poets and their audience provides a huge amount of analogies for describing the imaginary world the characters of narrative are supposed to live in, with a characteristic hierarchy: lions and boars are the referents for strong heroes who will conquer the poor deer or oxen they meet. Strong animals are often solitary ones, though they may sometimes protect their children, while feeble ones frequently gather in herds.

Since formulaic style penetrates all of linguistic fields in the epic, it also affected the similes, and ancient scholars suspected repeated similes to come from an intrusive late intervention on the text. For instance, when a comparison of a warrior to a stable horse suddenly freeing himself of his links is first applied to Paris, and later recurs for Hector, the scholiast accepted the first and rejected the second item, though we may appreciate it better now, before the Trojan hero faces the huge Achilles. It is a traditional device for characterizing the hero and echoing the action.

4. Semata: a world of meaningful objects

The whole world is thus full of analogical meanings. In this Homeric world, one may also note that some objects, places, animals, etc. are said to have different names, hence different meanings, for humankind and for the gods: for instance a hill in Troy's surroundings is called Bateia in men's language, whereas the gods situate there 'the tomb of dancing Myrine'. Scamandrios is the name for men of a river near Troy, which the gods call Xanthos. Furthermore, it has been noticed that gods' names generally correspond to Indo-European etymology, whereas men's names have no etymology, as if the poets thought that their gods spoke a more ancient language than the men. Oral traditions seem to lean toward a moving and plastic kind of 'archaeology of the past' (Boardman 2003) that writing will freeze or mummify.

The world the people of the Iliad and Odyssey live in is thus full of objects with meaning: the springs of Troy where Hector will die, with their marvellous nature (one is hot, the other ice-cold) evoke for him the time when Trojan women came there for washing, in peacetime. A tree near the walls of Troy is known, as Andromache recalls to her husband, to mark a weak spot in the construction, and ancient commentaries explained this as the part built by man, while Poseidon and Apollo were in charge of the other parts of the wall: this remark may count as an awful premonition of the future entry of the Achaeans into the city.

Those places and objects serving as signs (Greek sêma), are almost constantly overdetermined: let us mention the mound in the plain that old Nestor signals to his son Antilochus, as the turning post he must use in the chariot race of Iliad 23: he explains it might be a burial sêma, or a mere mound: this ambiguity comes from the fact there is no epitaph

written on it. Ilos' tomb is also known as such by Trojan oral tradition, but maybe not by the Achaeans.

In Iliad 6, 150-205, Glaucus tells Diomedes the legend of his ancestor Bellerophon. King Proitos believed his wife Anteia, who told him that Bellerophon had attempted to rape her. Proitos charged Bellerophon to carry a message to his father-in-law, king of Lycia, secretly asking him to kill the messenger. We meet in the text the word 'sêma kakon', but it cannot be determined if a verbal message is written on the folded tablet, or if it is a drawing with symbolic meaning. However, it seems that the holder of the message does not understand this meaning. Thus it has been supposed that both kings were using a secret script known to them only, or ancient Mycenaean writing forgotten by their contemporaries. In any case, this is absolutely the sole instance where a kind of 'writing' is mentioned by Homer, and it is far from clear that written words are implied.

In his journey to the Underworld, the Nekuia of the Odyssey, Odysseus receives from Teiresias an prediction: after his return to Ithaca, he will have to leave the island again, and walk with an oar on the shoulder to an inland country where people do not know the sea, and they will take his oar for a winnowing shovel. He will then plant the shovel, offering a sacrifice to Poseidon. Odysseus repeats Teiresias' prediction to Penelope after their recognition. In the time of Orality, an oar is thus an ambiguous sign, its interpretation depends on whether it is seen in a world of seamen or in a world of agricultural economy: metaphorical meaning arises in Orality.

In the world of literacy, objects seem to lose more and more this semantical density. Let us mention the case of signs that had a long-lasting life in Greek mind through literature, that of 'inscribed' signs on the skin, scars or birth stains. Odysseus' scar on the thigh, once discovered and recognized in Od. 19 by the old nurse Eurycleia, leaves no ambiguity regarding his identity: she remembers the way his grand-father gave the child his name, and invited him to a hunt in Parnassus mountains. This hunt was the occasion when Odysseus received his scar, or maybe won it, if we rightly interpret this youthful journey as a test, like those we know in classical times under the name of ephebeia. In Euripides' Electra, the princess sees on Agamemnon's tomb several signs she does not consider genuine proofs of her brother Orestes' return. But she is convinced when she sees a scar on his face, near the eyebrow: the child received a wound when hunting deer, and Electra remembers the scene. Thus 'reading' such signs on the skin regularly draws recognition through a process of memory.

Much later in Greek literature, in Heliodorus' Aithiopica, the heroine Chariclea, an abandoned child, undergoes many pains and difficult tests in her travels from Delphi to Ethiopia, until eventually the Ethiopian priest Sisimithres asks a painting to be fetched from the Royal palace, and reveals that Chariclea has on her arm an "ebony bracelet staining her ivory arm", as an undisputable –because indelible– sign of her identity, since she may be compared to the ancestor of the Ethiopian royal lineage, Andromeda, portrayed on the painting. It is all the more interesting that in this novel the first sign of identification for the young girl is a written letter, a linen embroidered strip put with the child by her mother Persinna. The text was written in sacred Ethiopian hieroglyphs, requiring decipherment and hermeneutics (by the Egyptian priest Calasiris), but it needs to be completed by the physical confrontation between the living girl and the icon on the painting in the final *peripeteia*. In the novelistic genre, other instances of exchanges of letters may confirm that though the genre fundamentally belongs to literacy, Heliodorus still knows the importance of signs on the skin as proofs of identity. Those signs stand as opposite to ambiguity: like modern DNA they link the mark on the skin to a sole individual. The semantic density does not arise from ambiguity, but from that link, called a symbol.

Let us return to Bellerophon's story told by Glaucus: apart from the mysterious tablet sent by

Proitus, it may be remarked that Anteia's denunciation of Bellerophon relies on oral means: she tried to seduce the youth, he did not accept, and she falsely told her husband that he tried to rape her. More or less the same schema is known in Greek literature for the character of Phaedra in Euripides' Hippolytus, whereas the classical tragedy contrasts with Anteia's story by using writing: since she understands that Theseus' son does not want to yield to her advances, Phaedra kills herself, leaving a written tablet that denounces Hippolytus as having tried to rape her. Theseus will believe dead Phaedra's lie. Like Socrates and Plato, Anteia and Phaedra may count as symbols of the radical change from Archaic period to classical time.