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Introduction. Rethinking Orality: Some Reasons for a Research

Classicists, and especially those interested to the archaic Greek culture, have to deal with one crucial issue, whose relevance is now clear also for the understanding of the literary systems of other cultures, in the Mediterranean area or even beyond, and in different periods: the ‘discovery’ or the ‘rediscovery’ of orality, with all its complex and often elusive mechanisms in the nodal phases of production, publication and transmission of a literary text.

Dealing with ancient Greek literature, philologists – often obsessed by the quest for ideal archetypes as close as possible to the original intentions of their putative authors – have increasingly found themselves grappling with elusive textual entities, whose nature could not be the mere consequence of a clear, ‘vertical’ transmission articulated in well – defined branches or ‘families’. But, when applied to archaic poetry, such ecdotic attitude often turns into aporetic conclusions, which can be resolved only if the focus is shifted from the abstract poetical ‘original’ – thought, made and disseminated exclusively through writing – to the effective nature of extant textual products, which hide, under their refined stylistic texture, a cultural message originally formulated in an oral form. And this aspect, which is crucial especially for the Homeric epic poetry, has been very well highlighted by Luigi Enrico Rossi, according to whom the Homeric poems are a “testimonianza” of oral poetry,¹ a mixture of voices, signs, forms, stylistic devices, narrative schemes and sequences, now inserted in a written textual grid, but still echoing the original oral *facies*.

Though its role has been variously declined by scholars in their interpretation of Homeric poetry, orality has involved an inevitable shift of attention from the text *per se* to the text as the result of a complex communicative mechanism, developed in a specific historical context, in which the phases of elaboration, publication and diffusion of poetical works were determined and influenced by a variable mix of spoken and written words. Moreover, in such phenomenon the oral dimension maintained a function until Late Antiquity and even beyond.

¹ See Rossi 2020, 34 “[...] resta una terza ipotesi: che, a cavallo fra oralità e scrittura, i poemi siano un composto, in verità per gran parte irreversibile ma almeno riconoscibile come tale: in questo caso di oralità essi sarebbero solo *testimonianza*”.

Since the 19th century,² the understanding of such elements has entailed a plurality of interferences between textual studies and a series of other disciplines, such as anthropology, linguistics, ethology and, more recently, even cognitivism, which, through the most diverse methodologies, have made it possible to better focus on the essential aspects of the Homeric poems. Any effort to retrace even a small part of this history becomes a journey along the paths of different and variegated lines of thought, joining personal histories and intellectual experiences beyond the boundaries of disciplinary specialisms, across different continents and dramatic events (the World Wars are significant *caesurae* for classics as well).

We may just think about the two fundamental stages of the modern developing of this path: on one hand, the strong compromise between anthropology and literary and philological studies elaborated by Gilbert Murray, who, proposing a close parallel with the Holy Scriptures and adopting the idea of a traditional book – capable of incorporating history and culture of an entire people –, suggests to consider the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as “ancient traditional book”;³ and, on the other hand, the contribution of the anthropological dimension in the investigations on Homeric poems conducted by Milman Parry and Albert Lord,⁴ who, noting the very high incidence of formulaicity in the poems, connected its origin to a fundamentally oral and improvisational system, substantiating this hypothesis with a systematic comparison with the contemporary epic oral traditions of the bards still active in the Balkan area.

The effects of these critical perspectives, variously taken up or opposed in the history of studies, proved to be disruptive in the approach to the Homeric text, as they contributed to highlight one unavoidable element: the level of antiquity of the traditions stratified in a real book of culture, in which the singers did not show their solipsistic and self-referential skill to create an original work of art, but constantly resorted to a complex system of myths, beliefs, stories that are part of the cultural baggage of an entire civilization. In other words, through effective tools, such as memory, formula, repetition, and cyclical nature of the story, they continued to reenact and to revitalize the expressive potentials of the oral communicative system.

² A central role for the ‘rediscovery’ of the function of orality in the Greek culture was played by the intuition developed in Wolf 1795, who first understood its dominant presence in the Homeric poems; but this concept was properly exploited only by Lord 1960 and by Parry 1971. For a recent overview of the impact of the oral studies on the interpretation of the Homeric poetry see e.g. Ready 2019, with further bibliography.

³ See Murray 1907, 91–252.

⁴ See note 2 above.

However, even today the debate on the nature of Homeric poems and, ultimately, on the pre-eminent characteristics of the literary products of the archaic period of the Greek culture is still hot and far from showing univocal critical positions. This volume, which is the result of a cycle of seminars held in 2019 in the Department of Human Studies of the University of L'Aquila, wishes to offer a further overview of some of the most recent developments, focusing on the complex role of orality in Greek literary culture and considering the Homeric poems as objects which convey an extremely elaborate and refined cultural message, at a chronological level, and under communicative conditions, different from the other European literary cultures.

In order to offer a more detailed picture, we asked for the help of other disciplines, ranging from cognitivism and linguistics, with their ability to analyze the primary brain mechanisms at the origin of cultural communication, to ethology, with its tools for examining communicative systems in the animal world, not devoid of interconnections with the elaboration and dissemination of concepts and messages in the human world. The contributions of such disciplines can allow us to explore the first stages of this research journey, which will continue with further steps dedicated to other interpretative path that can provide a multifarious sets of considerations to better highlight the complexity of the cultural message embedded in the archaic epic poetry (see Ercolani/Lulli 2022).

Some milestones of this path are:

1. The analysis of the neuroscientific mechanisms at the basis of the creation and the reception of complex cultural messages, with a special focus on the poetic experience of the Homeric poems.
2. The survey of the processes of codification and transmission of traditional knowledge in human groups thanks both to orality and writing, and with a specific reflection on the centrality of the educative system in such phenomenon.
3. A view on other applications of the oral communication system in the Greek culture at the end of classical age, with a special attention to the Platonic theoretical perspective.
4. A glimpse at the possible contribution of gender studies in the development of the communicative system of the epic poetry.

All these steps have been thought to build up a path that can lead to a dialogue or, in some cases, to the recovery of a dialogue between classics and other disciplines, as the necessary condition to get a better understanding of the mechanisms of literary communication in ancient Greece.

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