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METHOD, ETHICS AND ORALITY: ETHNOCENTRISM AND EARLY GREEK EPIC

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Introduction

Orality and its conventional corollary, literacy, have been central to Occidental Modernity's narratives of the self and to accounts of its historical progression. They underpin discussions of the beginning of Greek literature, the rise of a Hellenic identity, the invention of reason, philosophy, democracy and the *polis*, rhetoric and legal codes. Such 'master evolutionary narratives' have, of course, long been subject to critique. Accounts of orality and literacy too have been increasingly diversified and expanded to embrace literatures and cultures beyond the European periphery, in Africa, in Greece, the Caribbean, in Asia, in the Americas, and so on.

And yet, I want to suggest, with a few exceptions, the underlying ethnocentric bias of the field remains largely unchanged and unaccounted for. Such bias resides, I will argue, within the methodological foundations of the debate, in the very terms 'orality' and 'literacy' and in basic conceptions of medium, communicative exchange, consciousness, temporality and historical movement. These conceptions, commonly regarded as representations of material/sensory fact, have doggedly resisted both scientific and ethical scrutiny. Unaccounted for, they continue to exert their influence over our ethnographic, poetic and political perceptions.

Orality, Literacy and the Senses

The terms orality and literacy are commonly assumed to describe distinct modalities of verbal communication and thought. On the face of it, we are dealing with 'objective', 'self-evident' medial and sensory phenomena: orality is linked to voice and sound, literacy to writing and sight. Significantly, these basic phenomena are often associated with other, far-reaching attributes. In their 'state of nature', many living creatures, humans and, indeed, animals too, communicate by voice. In contrast, it is generally assumed that only human societies communicate by structured visual symbols and writing. The medial/sensory division between sound and sight thus plays an important role—at times taken for granted as the empirical foundation of, for example, accounts of the divide between the 'animal' and the 'human' or the divide between 'nature' and 'culture'.

Taken a step further, the distinction between sound and sight, and consequently between oral and literate communication, have been used as instrumental indices of “the ascent of man” and what we might (adapting the mediaeval/Aristotelian notion of the *scala naturae*) call the *scala culturae*, of 'early' vs. 'advanced' cultures, of 'tribal' vs. 'urban' societies, of 'traditional' and 'modern' and of a broad range of social and political 'theologies' (with critique by Agamben and many others), that is to say of man-made existential hierarchies. By the necessity of their identity and purpose, such hierarchies often embrace 'progressivist' temporal/historical narratives about 'the ascent of man' - be they (to pick, almost at random, a few prominent examples, *mutatis mutandis*) the Six Days of Creation (a divinely ordained progression from the heavens and the earth, through the animal kingdom, to man), the evolution of the commonwealth (the *koinônia*) in Aristotle's *Politics* (a 'natural', if complex progression from the family unit to the *polis*), the evolution of drama in the *Poetics* (a 'numeric' and thus logical progression from dithyramb to tragedy, from one actor to two and three, etc.), Hobbesian contractual orders (from barbarism to civilization, which 'by nature' require control over human nature), Hegelian dialectic (the progress of human consciousness by universal laws of history), etc. As, for example, Walter Ong in his “still oft-cited *Orality and Literacy*” (as note) describes it (),

...the oral and the literate were sorted into distinct 'cultures,' the literate succeeding the oral in a relation that almost always amounts to something like progress.

In such narratives, Homer, 'the founding hero (the *herôs ktistês*) of European literature', as, for instance Ernst Robert Curtius () once described him, and the narrative of Homeric orality first developed in detail by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the first few decades of the 20th century, play a foundational role. Parry and Lord's work provides the first, comprehensive, scientific basis for the study of orality around the world.

The Persistence of Methodological Habits

It is disturbing, though perhaps not surprising that such views persist long after Ong and despite much of the criticism levelled against his work (see further below). Thus, for example, Harvard historian of written culture, Martin Puchner, for example, in his recent, bestselling and much lauded *The Written World: How Literature Shaped History* (; already the title is revealing...) offers an extended reflection on the achievements of written cultures.

Puchner uses the term 'literature' *stricto sensu*. Without literature, he says at the very beginning of his book, he would miss “books on planes”, “the book on his bedside table” and more. He would, in other words, miss his affluent East-Coast lifestyle... But such losses, Puchner hasten to add, with a wizened tone ():

... barely scratche[s] the surface of what would be lost if literature had never existed, if stories were told only orally and had never been written down”.

As he explains:

Our sense of history, of the rise and fall of empires and nations, would be completely different. Most philosophical and political ideas would never have come into existence, because the literature that gave rise to them wouldn't have been written. Almost all religious beliefs would disappear along with the scriptures in which they were expressed. Literature isn't just for book lovers. Ever since it emerged four thousand years ago, it has shaped the lives of most humans on planet Earth.

In one sense, Puchner is right. “The lives of most humans on planet Earth” have changed over four thousand years. Difference is at the heart of history and time, of historicity and temporality. Indeed, difference is at the heart of

all human existence, even at a single moment in time, say, Sept. 7, 2020 (one should avoid the structuralist dichotomies of diachrony/ synchrony). Not all of Earth's inhabitants, for example, read books on planes or set them by their bedside tables. Some, indeed, even as they are on the ground and through no fault of their own, may find it a bit difficult, for example, to obtain clean drinking water, to feed their families or simply stay alive. Some might even prefer a slice of cake or a dry crust of bread to a book, whether in the air or on the ground.

But it is precisely an understanding of difference that is lacking from Puchner's book and its presentation of 'orality' and 'literacy'. It is true that, as for example, scripture is central to Abrahamic "religious beliefs" (to use Puchner's words). But it is equally true that these very religions also embody elaborate and complex non-scriptural traditions of *midrash*, *barayta*, *hadith*, catechism, and more. Not to mention the diverse medial practices of thousands of other religions around the world, in Africa, Asia, South America and indeed in Europe and North America. For Puchner at least, such religious beliefs do not seem to exist.

Puchner's sense of "our history" (*his* words, *my* emphasis) is, it would seem, *his* private sense of history at best. Puchner, of course, does illustrate his discussion with many examples from non-Western cultures. But he does so like a wealthy Nabob, rolling out richly woven carpets and silks at the feet of his admiring guests, or perhaps like a learned Leland Stanford (founder of the university), Collis Potter Huntington (of the eponymous library founded by his nephew) or Cecil Rhodes (of Oriel and Oxford fame), whose generous benefaction continues to shape our academic and cultural lives to this day...

Constructing a world on the basis of clearly defined concepts like 'orality' and 'literacy' is, of course, very effective. Such foundational concepts can be instrumentally applied to produce clear conclusions and specific goals. But the fact of the matter, let me suggest, is that, as, for example, in astrophysics, quantum mechanics, neuroscience, the study of memory, thermodynamics, meteorology or the development of language, so, methodologically speaking, with discourse and communication that rely on different medial foundations: *our* world - that is the world in its full, inherent diversity - exists in 'lumpy', messy, *complex* states. Such states are (as, in their different ways, Nils Bohr, Edward Lorenz, Werner Heisenberg, Kurt Gödel, Ernst Zermello and Abraham Frankel, Murray Gell-Mann, and others

would argue) methodologically 'complex', not (as Isaac Newton, Pierre-Simon Laplace and other foundational figures of 'classical' science believed) 'simple'. In technical, scientific terms, it is unpredictable, emergent, dynamic, interactive, stochastic, non-linear, non-reversible and entangled.

Disciplinary Change and the Study of Antiquity

Now, of course, in many fields of enquiry, many scholars have for a long time been making important contributions in an attempt to recognize the scientific and ethical implications of our basic methodological and disciplinary assumptions and to change them (for example, with relevance to our discussion - within 'post-continental', 'post-Deleuzian' and 'posthuman' studies, among students of 'new materialism' and so on).

In the field of classics, such important recognitions are also being voiced with great acuity. As, for example, the Post classicisms Collective has recently put it (), the problem is that:

...some of the most powerful narratives told about various aspects of the ancient world today continue to (implicitly or explicitly) ground their claims to coherence in the posited coherence of their subjects: the face- to- face society of ancient Athens; oral literary culture; a literary tradition internally webbed by allusion and intertext; a history of philosophy that can be reconstituted through *Quellenforschung*. The presumed unity of ancient cultures and traditions idealizes totalizing epistemic mastery of the past as the only way to rebuild from scattered fragments a living world qua whole. But, of course, this is a dream: even in the eighteenth century, total mastery of the remains of Greco- Roman culture was out of reach. The notion of the canon thus acquires importance as a part that encompasses the unity of the whole. The canon, especially in classical philology, makes available again the fantasy of recuperating the fragments of the past within the embodied person of the scholar. The mastery of a canon of knowledge about the past becomes an ethical imperative, then, not only because technique and rigor are valorized by the discipline but also because the demand for mastery perpetuates the fantasy that antiquity qua living unity can be made whole again by well- formed and responsible epistemic, disciplinary, and

ethical subjects.

The Post classicist Collective (significantly, a 'group' identity, not an 'individual – part of the point. See below) rightly note that many narratives describing various aspects of the ancient world today persist in grounding their “claims to coherence in the posited coherence of their subjects.”

This, as we have seen, is certainly the case in some studies in the field of orality and literacy, not least because of the seminal role which this field plays within the master narratives about the ancient world. As with some more-general traditions of philological method (though notwithstanding, e.g., the important philosophical work of Werner Hamacher [] - not generally acknowledged among classical scholars), fundamental convictions seem to form an almost impenetrable barrier to change, even within otherwise sincere attempts to break out of master narratives.

Plus Ça Change, Plus C'est la Même Chose

Consider, for example, influential work by the late John Foley, founder-editor of the journal *Oral Traditions*, a leading figure in the study of oral literatures and, until his untimely death (in 2012) one of the most prolific exponents of the debate over Homeric and early Greek orality.

Writing in a multi-authored volume entitled *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Antiquity*, in an essay 'Indigenous Poems, Colonialist Texts' Foley, in an attempt to acknowledge diversity, says: “The conviction that orality and literacy - or oral traditions and texts - are mutually exclusive phenomena” is false. He adds ():

...the “either-or” strategy has run its course; in the present state of knowledge it only distorts what we can learn about oral poetry. We need a model that corresponds to the messy and delightfully complex reality of verbal art in multiple media.

Foley is here clearly trying to correct what he sees as the wider methodological and ethical wrongs of earlier scholarship in the field. Instead of the dichotomous model, he (and other students of orality and literacy), proposes an alternative model based on an “infinite” spectrum of variants forms of orality and literacy that ():

show no straight-line 'progression' from one stage to the other, either historically or developmentally.

The impulse is right. Yet, let me suggest, even here method persists and as such it continues to enact the same ethnographic and cultural dichotomies and biases. Foley proposes a system of four “generalized but fact-based” (note the foundational 'objectivity' of the terms) “media categories” as the proposed scaffolding for his spectrum (). These, he suggests, are differentiated in terms of composition, performance and reception:

Category	Composition	Performance	Reception
1. Oral performance	Oral	Oral	Aural
2. Voiced texts	Written	Oral	Aural
3. Voices from the past	Oral/Written	Oral/Written	Oral/Written
4. Written oral poems	Written	Written	Written

This grid describes variants within the realities of verbal art. Yet, methodologically, all variants are combinations of exactly the same binary categories that take the substance of the concepts of “oral” and “written”, their link to sound and sight and, as such, to cognitive function, for granted and elude scrutiny, as if they were self-evident, objective “facts”. Fundamentally, then, despite Foley's best-intentioned efforts, the methodological foundations of the system thus remain unchanged and, if we are to overcome them, require deeper scrutiny.

The Practical Implications of Underlying Methodological Premises

These persistent binaries categories, I should stress, are not simply scholarly abstractions. They have immediate, concrete effects within our general perceptions of the world. They insinuate themselves into our practice, sometime (as, for example, elsewhere in the realm of politics and aesthetics, as Jacques Rancière has shown) allow the underlying framework to persist.

Consider, for example, Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott's epic *Omeros* (), a poem that adapts Homer's *Iliad* and transports the heroes Achilles (*Achille*) and Hector (*Hector*) to the world of St Lucian fishermen and to reconfigure the experience of Homer's poems to the experience of the former Afro-Caribbean colonies. As Joseph Farrell, for example shows (), *Omeros* develops an intricate, complex relation to the tradition of classical epic.

Walcott is not an *aidos*, a bard or a *grillot*. He is a master of the English language and of literary traditions of the West. *Omeros* and Walcott as a

writer received the highest accolade in Stockholm, Princeton NJ, and worldwide for its exquisite nuance, discerning eye, sophistication, and bold post-colonial critiques—accompanied by Walcott's eloquent reflective essays. *Omeros* can nevertheless be comfortably situated on the grid within Foley's spectrum, perhaps as a particular variant of the “written oral poem”.

Yet, even here, I suggest, fundamental ethical, conceptual and methodological binaries continue to valorise the demand for asymmetric orders of mastery that - to borrow from the words of the Postclassicism Collective - “perpetuates the fantasy that antiquity qua living unity can be made whole again”. *Omeros*, let me suggest, persists in mapping its portrayal of Afro-Caribbean life on the grid of Occidental 'progressivist' narratives. Like a beautiful set of verbal Gauguin images, Walcott depicts the noble intensity of Achille, Hector, Hélène, of the weather, of a medley of divinities, of the blind *grillot* Omeros and of Afro-Caribbean life in general in the vernacular of Homer's 'oral' epic.

Well-formed, moving, drawn with intricate and sensitive eloquence, Walcott's portrayal ultimately reflects the beauty of a 'simple' life that has no consciousness of the high achievements of modern Western civilization. By the very force of its achievements in the halls of Western literature, *Omeros* seems to offer its delights to Occidental readers, as Gauguin paintings offer themselves to viewers at the Tate, or the National Gallery, the Musée d'Orsay or the old Jeu de Paume.

Orality and Literacy as Cyphers of Contingent, Unstable, Non-repeatable Patterns of Language, Cognition and Social Practice

But let us turn back to some of the fundamental premises of orality and literacy in the abstract again. There is, of course, no question that sound and sight are distinct sensory media. The point we must however stress is that the relation of sight and sound to language, to discourse, to the use of signs, to memory and cognition, is far from simple. Nor are these relations 'objectively evident', consistent or fixed. The use of voice/writing today, is not necessarily what it was yesterday or will be tomorrow. To put it otherwise, orality and literacy do not describe distinct underlying modalities, not even a spectrum, if by 'spectrum' we mean a defined, sequential, ordered range of frequencies, colour attributes, etc.

Let me instead suggest that *orality and literacy are nothing more than cyphers of communication and thought that link the otherwise distinct medial*

qualities of sound and sight to contingent, unstable, non-repeatable patterns of language, discourse, memory, cognition and social practice.

Why, then, are orality and literacy *not* recognized as such fluid cyphers? Why are they consistently closed-off and reified, even by such able scholars and writers as Foley and Walcott? The answer, let me suggest, lies, first, in the fact that cyphers do not serve us well in the construction of taxonomic grids of the type proposed by Foley. And such cyphers most certainly do not allow us to construct progressivist historical narratives and instrumental value judgements.

Orality and literacy continue to be reified, let me suggest because of the history of their methodology. The core of the problem lies in the “technologizing” (to import Walter Ong's tell-all term from the sub-title of his book: *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*) of our understanding of the relation between mediality of discourse and its evolution in time. This is particularly evident within the discipline of 'classical studies' and the study of Homeric orality.

Our understanding of early Greek orality and its literary corollaries depends on highly systematic 'technical' discussions of the type developed initially by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. These discussions involve highly sophisticated often quantitative (indeed, already in Parry) observations on dialectal, metrical, grammatical, syntactic and morphological detail, as well as—crucially—on the coherence of a closed 'scientific' methodological framework (cf., e.g., the fundamental term 'formula!' – this is, of course, not science as it is practised in the last fifty or so years). Observations by Parry and by mainstream 'oralist' scholarly traditions (though they evolved and changed over time) were thus fundamentally assumed to be disinterested 'objective' facts, separate from human intervention and 'interpretation'.

And yet, as Ato Quayson (), for example, suggests, “There is ... a strong family resemblance between literary history and the history of ideas”. It is, let me suggest, precisely the complex nexus of such historical notions, 'scientific' and 'objectivist' assumptions underpinning discussions of orality that have sometimes made it possible to sidestep and foreclose ethical, ideological and political scrutiny.

Psychodynamic Constructs

To expose the fallacy of each and every element of this methodological infrastructure, especially in relation to Milman Parry's work, would require a rather long and technical book (see Kahane, forthcoming, de Gruyter). But, for our purposes, a brief more-general example should suffice.

Writing in one of his important early publications, *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong says ():

By 1500 B. C. a good many populations were using scripts, and it does seem strange that only at one point ... the supreme system of sound writing was achieved. Diringier [] (p. 121) suggests that just possibly a single man may have invented the alphabet, demonstrating the same kind of individual genius shown later in Newton. But this appears quite unlikely, for oral cultures, as we shall see, hardly produce individual thinkers or inventors as do cultures where writing, and particularly the alphabet, has become deeply interiorized and given the individual relative independence of the tribe. In earlier cultures, highly oral even though they possessed one or another script, thought moved ahead in a communally structured glacier where individual activity was quickly encysted if indeed it ever appeared.

Ong here relies on the work of Parry and Lord, of course. He assumes an underlying narrative of the emergence of individual subjectivity out of a 'primitive' state of the communal 'tribal' consciousness. Furthermore (following Havelock, Goody and others), Ong here links the emergence of individual thinking to the medial qualities of writing and, historically, to the rise of literacy. "We do not know and probably will never know the full story but how the alphabet came about", he says, but he does suggest that "we can ... know something about reasons for its tardy and nonce appearance if we reflect on the relationship of the alphabet the spoken word and on the psychological distance but when the spoken and the alphabetized medium". Here, then, lies the essence of the methodological problem.

Ong's argument depends on what he sees as the technical relation between sound/speech and sight/writing to time and space. He says ():

Speech itself a sound is irrevocably committed to time. It leaves no discernible direct effect in space, where the letters of

the alphabet have their existence. Words come into being through time and exist only so long as they are going out of existence. ... When I pronounce “reflect,” by the time I get to the “-flect” the “re-” is gone, and necessarily and irretrievably gone. A moving object in the visual field can be arrested. It is, however, impossible to arrest sound and have it still present. ... To view something closely by side, we wish to stop it for inspection, and we do so when we can, studying even motion itself, or so we pretend, in a series of still shots. ... None of the other senses gives us the insistent impression that what it registers is something necessarily progressing through time. Hearing does. Sound is psychologically always something going on ... a kind of evanescent effluvium [note the metaphor: an unpleasant discharge or waste product...] ... *verba volant, scripta manent*. ... Operations with the alphabet imply that words ... can somehow be present all at once ...

It would be unfair to strip Ong's argument of its intricate construction and nuance. His work is well worth reading. But in the end, the conclusions he draws are that the temporality of sound forces flux (an “evanescent effluvium” – note the derogatory, clinical metaphor—a clever verbal sleight of hand) upon its users and discourages the formation of abstract unified concepts while the full grasp which the visual medium, the alphabet and writing offer is conducive to abstractions and thus to advanced, general patterns of thought. As, for example, Emevwo Biakolo () at the university of Lagos rightly suggests:

The consequence [of Ong's claims, if we allow them to stand], is that human utterance ceases to be evanescent and becomes fixed, linear, reversible or retraceable, so that our beloved “re” remains intact ages after we have crossed “flect.” This commitment of sound to space through the invention of the alphabet makes such a tremendous impact upon the process of human verbalization that no less than the workings of human consciousness are altered by it.

And yet, as Biakolo recognizes and as we ourselves would stress, Ong's argument is, at best a historical fantasy created to uphold, we would suggest, an instrumental master narrative.

In plain, reductive practical terms, I no more 'think' communally, that is to say, in a group, than I express myself in ordinary everyday communication by means of voice in a chorus (except, of course, on very special, highly unusual occasions where I might be literally speaking prescribed words, whether memorized or written, together with other speakers, as, for example, in communal prayer in a church, mosque or synagogue).

Ong would here, of course, argue that what is meant by individuality is a deeper cognitive process essential to the very idea of subjectivity and the self. Yet such conceptions of individuality, of 'interiorized subjects' and of mind as separate from and independent of other human minds and the surrounding world, will not have been 'invented' until, say, Descartes' *cogito* in the 17th century, Kant's Critiques and the long traditions they have engendered. Yet these traditions, needless to say, only emerged in early modernity, several thousand years after the invention and wide proliferation of writing. The conclusion seems obvious: Ong's link between literacy and the invention of 'individual thought' is little more than an anachronistic historical fantasy.

More importantly, as anyone who has read Freud, Marx, Nietzsche or indeed many other contemporary critics of subjectivity, consciousness, intention and the self since at least the 19th or the early 20th century knows, as most contemporary arguments (*mutatis mutandis*, and not as a single monumental body of work, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Koselleck, Latour, Butler, etc.) in almost every field of enquiry from psychology to politics to philosophy, linguistics, anthropology and sociology argue, subjectivity, not least subjectivity in the present era, is best viewed as an 'exterior', intersubjective, performative emergent phenomenon, constructed interactively *ad hoc* within complex, contingent social spheres rather than implanted in man as some unique 'spark', whole and independent of the group. One could look, by way of an example, with specific reference to the study of 'classical' antiquity, to the Postclassicisms Collective (). This collective is made up of eminent 'individual' scholars, but its views about (the plurality of...) what happens after 'classicism' is unbroken – it avoids ascription to individual authors.

From this perspective, Ong's methodological foundations, his distinctions and his conclusions are, to put it bluntly, an un-scientific absurdity. His arguments (to go through them in detail would require a long book) are meticulously constructed for the purpose of creating a progressivist narrative. But, precisely for this reason, these arguments all the more fantastic constructs. What's more, as we have seen from our brief discussion of both Foley's attempt to produce a non-structured conceptual "spectrum" and from Walcott's postcolonial epic, such underlying general arguments can support the production of outputs which, even when widely acclaimed, sustain some ethically and intellectually problematic patterns of thought.

An Alternative?

The question nevertheless remains, what is the alternative? How, then, are we to redefine the field? The answer, in line with much contemporary work in history, philosophy, and the sciences, though of methodologically 'complex', can in practice, nevertheless, be succinctly summarized.

As we have already suggested, assuming the plurality and mutability of the uses of both communication by sound and communication by graphic symbols, we must either give up the terms 'oral' and 'literate' or open their meanings to an infinite, historicized and unstructured range of contingent modality of communication and thought. Doing so might suggest that, had Walcott's Achilles and Hector, for example, composed their own song (rather than Walcott's song, or my song, or our song), they might have done so in a variety of ways, but not likely in the pattern of the *Iliad*, not as an imitation or an adaptation of Homer, or Omeros (Walcott's grillo figure in *Omeros*). Their song might well have generated multiple *tangential* or *topological* relations (to draw on geometric method) to Homeric epic, enacted in the minds of others with other discourses, some written, others spoken or sung, some performed or inscribed, others in fragmented memory, some from St Lucia, others from Africa, or Iceland. Some of those other minds will have viewed such *tangential* relations as their own private sensations, or, indeed, as part of a group identity. The 'truth' of such views lies in the non-existence of a master narrative. They are all 'right' as much as they are all 'wrong', they should all be acknowledged, they all deserve to be heard.

Such an approach to orality and literacy, to be sure, will not obliterate work by Ong, or Puchner, or Foley, or the histories of scholarship and

literature, but it will put such histories in their place, as versions of narratives in the field whose attempt to write (here one may use the *mot proper*) 'master narratives' is permitted, but only in as much as they possess no 'mastery'. True, without master narratives it is more difficult to create order, to establish political, social and cultural theologies, to define the relations between master and subject, to exclude some voices from the discussion, to prioritize others, to establish empires and narratives of sovereign power. But that, hopefully, is precisely the point.

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