Between

Belonging in Ancient Greek Oral Tradition

Blaž Zabel

Introduction

Since Milman Parry's influential research in Homeric scholarship in the early thirties, orality has been a key concept in classical literature studies. Parry's argument is that Homeric poems are oral in their origin. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both have a specific oral-formulaic structure and are composed of formulaic expressions, a specific feature of oral composition of poetry. This new perspective shook the world of classics and Homeric scholarship. Equally ground-breaking was his methodology. Parry observed that South Slavic bards composed poetry with a set of formulaic expressions, utilised in the act of performing, and concluded that, since similar compositional features can be observed in Homeric poetry, the latter must have been composed orally as well (Parry 1971).

After Parry's death, Albert Lord continued researching oral literature. With the publication of his work *The Singer of Tales*, the idea of the oral nature of Homeric poetry gained worldwide acceptance (Lord 1962). At approximately the same time, Jack Goody and Ian Watt extended the idea of orality to culture in general. They understood early archaic Greece as a culture with an "oral mindset" in opposition to social and cultural factors of the literate culture (Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1968). These arguments were further developed by Eric Havelock in *The Muse Learns to Write* in the early eighties. He argued that adoption of the alphabet in Greece greatly changed the mentality of its culture.

These researchers all position orality and literacy, and oral and written literature in strict opposition. Recently, however, such harsh differentiations have been questioned and severely criticised[1]. Contemporary research (such as the regular conferences and series of publications named *Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World* and the *Oral Tradition Journal*) tends to dismiss the binary opposition between orality and literacy and focus on particular oral manifestations in different cultures. In these attempts to focus on specific examples, however, we can notice a shift away from theoretical discussions on orality. It is certainly welcome that this research presents a more balanced and realistic view on oral and written poetry. However, a broader context of oral literature is often overlooked. In accordance, traditional philological methods, such as close reading of the text, have generally been applied, while theoretical and contextual discussions have been put aside. Andrew Ford thus observes: «In the study of Greek literature, however, it is more common to find scholars who acknowledge the importance of context and occasion for Greek song only to retreat to texts at the first opportunity» (Ford 2007: 17).

Discussing belonging in ancient Greek oral poetry can help us to overcome this drawback. In a recent paper about orality and world literature, Caroline Levine ascribes a characteristic of "oral portability" to written literature and a characteristic of "representativeness" to oral literature, the former summoning the «globalizing patterns of circulation, translation, and transmission» and the latter implying understanding «each text as arising from particular cultural, historical, and economic circumstances» (Levine 2013: 226–227). She argues that

> literature may travel around the world, but fails to represent the world, while oral performance may represent many globally dispersed cultures but remain stuck in particular places. Literature, it would seem, gives us portability without

[1] See for example Charlotte Eubanks' contribution titled *New Orality* to the State of the Discipline Report 2014-2015 of the American Comparative Literature Association.

> representativeness, while orality gives us representativeness without portability. (*Ibid.*: 228)

From what Levine argues, it seems that oral literature expresses belonging to a specific cultural setting much better than written literature, but that it finds it much harder to travel out of the cultural setting in which it was produced. Written literature, on the other hand, expresses belonging to a particular cultural setting to a lesser degree, but travels across the world much more easily. In view of this, Nigel Nicholson's (2013) research of Pindar's tenth ode and its relation to the earlier oral tradition provides some interesting findings. He specifically contrasts the local Locri mythology and oral tradition about Euthymus with the panhellenic notes in Pindar's ode connecting them to the different visions of Locri's role in the world. From his comparison, it seems that local oral tradition has perceived its sense of belonging in a different way than Pindar – and this is something that Nicholson connects with the mobility of the traveling poet «who could provide the authority», while «Euthymus' narrative, by contrast, lacked both melodic form and an author-figure, and instead located its authority within the general knowledge and acceptance of the local community» (17).

In this article, I argue that in ancient Greek literature, belonging is closely connected with orality and oral performance. I will first demonstrate that oral language promotes connection with the lifeworld, that it is closely connected with the surrounding world, and I will discuss how orality promotes the notion of belonging to a community and its locus. Next, I will, by discussing *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis*, demonstrate how the oral performance and oral character of ancient Greek poetry promote belonging to a particular locus and connect the audience with the lifeworld. Finally, I will further argue that oral character is as an ontological condition of literature present in all literary manifestations, even written ones. I will also suggest that all literatures belong to a particular place and time, but that they all possess the possibility to travel and thus become world literatures.

Belonging in oral language and literature

Let us start our discussion of orality with Walter J. Ong's critique of structuralism. In the rarely referenced final chapter of his *Orality and Literacy*, Ong critically analyses what he calls a "textualist school", nowadays more commonly known as structuralism. He criticises structuralism for being «one of the most text-bound of all ideologies» and further, for perceiving texts as a «closed system». Oral cultures on the other hand, «hardly had this kind of illusion» of a closed system and «had no sense of language as 'structure'» (162–166). Ong's objection is thus clearly directed against structuralist conception of a language as a non-referential system of signs, first proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure defined language as a system of signs (each consisting of a signifier and a signified) where the meaning of each sign develops in relation to all other signs. As such, structuralists perceive language as an essentially closed, non-referential system that does not refer to any reality outside of the language itself (see Culler 1975; Culler 1986).

Ong's own understanding of language and orality, however, could not be further from the structuralist perspective. As far as grammar and structure of language are concerned, he explicitly states that «rules of grammar in natural human languages are used first and can be abstracted from usage and stated in words only with difficulty and never completely» (1982: 7). Ong's opposition to structuralist conception of language can be observed also in his nine characteristics of orality (36–56). For the present discussion, the most important characteristics of oral culture are that orality is much closer to the human lifeworld and that orality is empathetic and participatory. While written language analyses, estranges and objectifies the phenomena it describes, orality assimilates the alien and objective world to the immediate interaction of human beings (42–43). Furthermore, oral culture is empathetically connecting the human being with the world, while written language separates them by forming a subject-object polarity. A spoken language is also a moment

of connection between different speakers, while written texts individualize and isolate (72–73).

Ong's argument that orality connects the individual with the lifeworld closely resembles Heidegger's understanding of language as a discourse. In his text *What is Philosophy?* he states that pre-metaphysical Greek thought perceived the λόγος (word) as the actual being of entities (i.e. that the language discloses being). If we try to describe this argument (or rather force it into) terms of structuralism, we could say that for a pre-metaphysical Greek person, there was no difference between the signifier, the signified and the referenced thing itself. Similarly, we can compare "oral culture" with Heidegger's concept of dwelling that is lost with the metaphysics, that is, failure of modern people to dwell in the unfolding of the world (see Carman 2003.

As we can see, oral language and literature are much closer to the human lifeworld and promote assimilation of alien and objective worlds in the immediate interaction of human beings. Oral language assimilates the objective world to present it as part of the familiar lifeworld, it empathetically binds human beings with the world and with other members of their community. It connects members of a particular society and culture together and, at the same time, links them to their locus and their past. Orality thus directly promotes belonging to a specific community, culture, tradition and locus. Since oral language and literature break down barriers between subject and object, a human being becomes directly integrated with the surrounding world and its culture. Through orality, a person directly belongs to their immediate lifeworld, to their culture and community.

Furthermore, as the investigation of oral language and structuralism has demonstrated, oral and written language have different characteristics. While written language objectifies and alienates a person from their lifeworld, oral language empathetically connects him/her with the world, community and culture. In this regard, we can also understand Levine's connection of orality with representativeness and written literature with portability. Oral literature promotes belonging to a specific locus, community and

culture and thus expresses representativeness, while written literature detaches itself from the lifeworld and thus travels much more easily.

Belonging and Orality in *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis*

Let me now demonstrate how orality and oral language promote belonging to a particular community and locus with an example. To this end, I will discuss *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis*, a nine verses long hymn, dating probably to the archaic period (around 600BC). Below is the hymn and its translation:

> Ἄρτεμιν ὕμνει, Μοῦσα, κασιγνήτην Ἑκάτοιο.
> παρθένον ἰοχέαιραν, ὁμότροφον Ἀπόλλωνος,
> ἥθ᾽ ἵππους ἄρσασα βαθυσχοίνοιο Μέλητος
> ῥίμφα διὰ Σμύρνης παγχρύσεον ἅρμα διώκει
> ἐς Κλάρον ἀμπελόεσσαν, ὅθ᾽ ἀργυρότοξος Ἀπόλλων
> ἧσται μιμνάζων ἑκατηβόλον ἰοχέαιραν.
> καὶ σὺ μὲν οὕτω χαῖρε θεαί θ᾽ ἅμα πᾶσαι ἀοιδῇ:
> αὐτὰρ ἐγώ σε πρῶτα καὶ ἐκ σέθεν ἄρχομ᾽ ἀείδειν,
> σεῦ δ᾽ ἐγὼ ἀρξάμενος μεταβήσομαι ἄλλον ἐς ὕμνον.

> Sing, Muse, of Artemis, the sister of the Archer, the virgin who shoots arrows, who was nourished together with Apollo. After she has watered the horses by the river Meles with its deep reeds, she drives the golden chariot quickly through Smyrna to Claros, where vines grow, and where Apollo sits with his silver bow and waits for her, the Far-shooter, the Arrow-shooter. And now I bid farewell to you with my song, to you and all the goddesses. I sing you first, with you I begin my song, and having started with you, I move on to another hymn[2].

Characteristics of oral composition are evident: hymn is composed in hexameters, it uses common epithets (e.g. ἑκατηβόλος; Far-Shooting), it uses characteristic formulas for expressing certain

[2] As translated in Graziosi 2002: 72.

ideas (e.g. Ἄρτεμιν ὕμνει, Μοῦσα; Sing, Muse, of Artemis), and even longer formulaic expressions, such as the last two verses which are characteristic of Greek hymnic poetry (αὐτὰρ ἐγώ σε πρῶτα καὶ ἐκ σέθεν ἄρχομ᾽ ἀείδειν, / σεῦ δ᾽ ἐγὼ ἀρξάμενος μεταβήσομαι ἄλλον ἐς ὕμνον; I sing you first, with you I begin my song, and having started with you, I move on to another hymn). There are also other deictic exclamations suggesting that the hymn was performed orally, such as καὶ σὺ μὲν οὕτω χαῖρε (And now I bid farewell to you), αὐτὰρ ἐγώ σε πρῶτα καὶ ἐκ σέθεν ἄρχομ᾽ ἀείδειν (I sing you first, with you I begin my song) and even Ἄρτεμιν ὕμνει, Μοῦσα (Sing, Muse, of Artemis), when we acknowledge that a bard appealed to the Muse before he began his song. The poem was thus most probably composed orally and was clearly intended for oral performance.

As we can observe, the hymn stresses the connection of Artemis with a particular geographical locus, i.e. Smyrna and the Smyrnean river Meles. In the hymn, Artemis waters the horses near Meles and then travels with her chariot across Smyrna to Claros (where Apollo is waiting). Smyrna and the river Meles are clearly represented as a place where Artemis spends her time to rest and water the horses or possibly even resides[3]. The hymn thus directly links her with the polis Smyrna and, subsequently, with a community of people residing there (just as other hymns often expresses belonging to some other polis or place, e.g. *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* expresses belonging to Chios and Delphi). Furthermore, since the hymn is paying homage to Artemis, the polis is conceptualised as a place dear to her. It is Smyrna where Artemis is present and it is across Smyrna that Artemis travels to Apollo, thus the hymn consequently praises the polis and its community as well. In this regard, the content of the poem clearly expresses belonging to a particular locus, i.e. Smyrna and river Meles, and to a particular community, i.e. a polis.

[3] There are indications Artemis might have had a temple near river Meles.

Moreover, Barbara Graziosi (2002) demonstrates convincingly how the river Meles was in the oral tradition represented also as Homer's birthplace (72–77). She argues that the description of Homer's birth in *Vita Herodotea* (27-31), where we can read a story of how a woman Cretheis went to a festival on the banks of Meles, bore Homer and named him Melesigenes after the river, can in fact be traced back to the archaic period and to Smyrna, approximately around the time in which the hymn to Artemis was composed. Knowing that traditionally, Artemis was perceived as a patron of women's festivals and a goddess of childbirth, the connection between the Artemis, festival in her honour on the banks of Meles, and the legend about Homer becomes clear. The above said, moreover, has specific significance for the hymn's performance. In the Greek oral tradition, Homer was seen as the mythical bard from whom all other bards are either descended or was seen as a mythical predecessor, the inventor of oral poetry. Such a figure is characteristic of many traditions of oral poetry (Foley 1999). What is important here, however, is that the bard (or any person) performing this hymn would perceive himself as directly connected with Homer, the mythological founder of oral poetry, who was born on the banks of river Meles. The hymn then expresses belonging to Smyrna not only through the presence of Artemis near river Meles, but also through the birthplace of the founder of oral poetry.

This has further consequences for the nature of the hymn and its performance. If we imagine the *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis* being performed, then performance itself, i.e. the act of singing the song (ἀείδειν), must have alone expressed belonging to Meles and Smyrna. Oral tradition had it that Homer was born near Meles and that it was Homer who invented the oral poetry. As such, the whole performance must have evoked belonging to this particular place, to Smyrna. The act of the oral performance itself is thus expressing belonging to Homer and, with it, to Homer's birthplace. Furthermore, this also promotes the connection of the performer and the audience with the lifeworld, since they are directly experiencing belonging to this particular locus. As the bard sings and as the audience listens to him, they are recreating the art which has its roots on the banks of river

Meles. The performance is thus in a way expressing immediate belonging to Homer's birthplace. The content of the hymn, i.e. worshipping Artemis and her presence in Smyrna, further emphasises this belonging.

As we can, *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis* expresses belonging to a particular locus, community and culture in two ways. First, through worshipping Artemis and her presence near river Meles. Second, through the act of performance, since the mythical inventor of poetry Homer was born in Smyrna. Moreover, hymn must have connected the bard and the audience with their lifeworld: the community in Smyrna is worshiping Artemis, a goddess present in their polis and in their lifeworld. Furthermore, the audience is experiencing the performance of the hymn (as the bard is singing it) as part of their lifeworld. But the act of singing a hymn is possible only because Homer, the inventor of oral poetry or the bard's predecessor was born on the banks of Meles. A phenomenon of performing a hymn thus directly expresses belonging to the immediate lifeworld of the polis and its community. *Homeric Hymn 9 to Artemis* is thus a good example of how oral poetry empathetically connects the people with their lifeworld, community and culture.

Conclusions: Belonging from Oral to Written Literature

I have argued that belonging and representativeness are connected with orality, oral language and oral literature. I have also argued, following Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, that written language (especially when conceived as a non-referential system) promotes alienation of the lifeworld, objectifies it, and establishes a subject-object dichotomy. But the question as to what extent written literature differs from oral literature remains to be discussed.

I would argue that all literatures are to some extent oral in their nature. There are, of course, different ways in which literature can be oral, either composed and performed orally (as in South Slavic oral poetry), written and subsequently performed orally (as in some forms of slam poetry), composed orally and subsequently written (as was the

case with Homeric poetry in the classical period), written and read on a physical or digital media, etc. But regardless of the way in which literature is produced, distributed and received, it always to some extent remains oral. This, I would argue, applies to literature produced and received in a written form as well.

The reason is largely because literature is in its nature referential and connects the receiver (or reader) with his lifeworld, a feature inherited from the oral nature of language. Yves Bonnefoy (1990), for example, writes that «poetry is what aims at an object – at this being right before us, in its absolute, or at being itself» (798). He implies that poetry in the process of reading evokes the being itself and connects the reader with his/her immediate lifeworld. Heidegger argues for a similar point in his interpretation of Hölderlin's poetry. All literatures, including written literatures, are thus a type of an oral performance. As far as written texts are concerned, they are neither public nor vocal performances, but it is as if the writing and reading are themselves acts of oral performance. There is no literature without language and there is no language without orality. Oral language is a basis for every literary manifestation, it is a condition for the existence of any literature.

When we thus take orality as a condition for the existence of literature into consideration, the described gap between belonging and written literature seems much less severe. When literature is produced, it is necessarily produced through an oral language. As such, connections with the lifeworld, culture and locus are directly inscribed into orality, so that all literatures express certain representativeness and belonging. The concept of world literature understood by, for example, David Damrosch (2003) as «works that circulate beyond their culture of origin» (4) and act as a «form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time» (281), is a clear example of how written literature travels, but at the same time expresses belonging to a particular culture, time and locus. If all literatures are, as I have proposed above, defined by the oral character of the language, it is necessary that they also belong to a particular culture and community and that they represent their own time and space.

Works cited

Bonnefoy, Yves. "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page", *Critical Inquiry* 16.4 (1990): 794–806.

Carman, T. *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Culler, Jonathan. *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986.

Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975.

Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.

Dougherty, Carol, and Leslie Kurke. *The Cultures within Ancient Greek Culture: Contact, Conflict, Collaboration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Eubanks, Charlotte. "Next: New Orality", *The 2014–2015 Report on the State of the Discipline of Comparative Literature*, ACLA, 2014.

Finnegan, Ruth H. *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*, London, Routledge, 1992.

Foley, John M. *Homer's Traditional Art*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Ford, Andrew. "From letters to literature: reading the 'song culture' of classical Greece", *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Ed. Harvey Yunis, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007: 15-37.

Goody, Jack. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Goody, Jack, and Ian Watt. *The Consequences of Literacy*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.

Graziosi, Barbara. *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of the Epic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Havelock, Eric. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986.

Heidegger, Martin. *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1958.

Heidegger, Martin. *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1976.

Levine, Caroline. "The Great Unwritten: World Literature and the Effacement of Orality", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 74.2 (2013): 217–237.

Lord, Albert Bates. *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962.

Nicholson, Nigel. "Cultural Studies, Oral Tradition, and the Promise of Intertextuality", *American Journal of Philology*, 134.1 (2013): 9–21.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*, London, New York, Methuen, 1982.

Parry, Milman. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.

Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959.

Thomas, Rosalind. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, Cambridge.

The author

Blaž Zabel

Blaž Zabel is a PhD student in Classics at Durham University. His research interests include: relations between classical literature and world literature, orality in classical and world literature, and philosophy of education.

Email: blaz.zabel@durham.ac.uk

The paper

Date sent: 31/01/2017
Date accepted: 15/04/2017
Date published: 31/05/2017

How to quote this paper

Zabel, Blaž, "Belonging in Ancient Greek Oral Tradition", *Longing and Belonging/ Désir et Appartenance*, Eds. Massimo Fusillo, Brigitte Le Juez, Beatrice Seligardi, *Between*, VII.13 (2017), http://www.betweenjournal.it/