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TRANSMISSION OF MENTAL IMAGES AS A MECHANISM OF COMPOSITION IN PERFORMANCE IN ORAL TRADITION ON THE ANALYSIS OF HOMERIC POEMS¹

The oral theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord opened a new chapter in the study of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, allowing a partial understanding of the technique of song composition, its structure, the way in which the oral singer formulates his thoughts, and the influence of the audience on the shape of the narrative. Oral theory also freed the discussion of the quality of oral songs from the rigours of literary criticism, forcing scholars to revise their assumptions about the so-called ‘mistakes’ of the singer and to look at the question of typical, recurring structures in the narrative, such as the formula or the typical scene, in a different light.

¹ This paper is a summary of a PhD thesis that was written in Polish under the title “Transmisja obrazów mentalnych jako mechanizm funkcjonowania *composition in performance* w tradycji oralnej na podstawie analizy poematów homeryckich.” The work was supervised by Professor Karol Zieliński (University of Wrocław, Institute of Classical, Mediterranean, and Oriental Studies) and was defended on November 19, 2024. The PhD thesis was reviewed by Professor Piotr Stępień (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) and Professor Leonard Muellner (Brandeis University).

Fieldwork conducted on the living epic tradition of the southern Slavs has revealed the flexible and variable nature of the tradition. Albert Lord pointed out, among other things, the pictorial nature of many parts of Yugoslav songs, which were not constructed according to a pattern developed by tradition, as opposed to themes (typical scenes) based on so-called basic scaffolding. The images that are evoked by the singer through the words are merged by association with the detail images that follow, and together they form the target image. Lord also drew attention to the associative links between the phrases (which were not always formulaic), so that the phrases tended to occur serially. These couplets and clusters of formulae are a phenomenon that is to some extent related to structures observed in another Slavic epic tradition, namely the Russian *byliny*. Alexander Sabynin, referring to studies of lyric songs, observed in the *byliny*'s the presence of so-called "discrete-rhythmic constructions" based on associative series, in which the appearance of one element entailed with a high degree of probability the appearance of subsequent elements. Research into the *byliny* confirms Lord's assumptions about the important role of association through multiple repetition in the epic tradition.

The pre-verbal level of song composition was studied by Michael Nagler in the 1960s. The *Gestalt*, the mental template, is expressed by the singer according to the current narrative need and, most importantly, it can not only be verbally realised in different ways, but also creatively processed by the singer. By recognising this functionality, it is possible to arrive at the correct poetic signification of a given part of the narrative. This flexibility of Nagler's concept stems from the assumption that an almost infinite number of metrical phrases are centred around the *Gestalt* as it appears in the poet's mind, with semiological associations as the focal force. So the underlying preverbal image that underpins the construction of a scene can be – and probably always will be – traditional, but it can

be realised differently each time. It is from here that the metonymic nature of *Gestalt* emerges, both in terms of the way in which a particular image can be expressed verbally, and in terms of the wider tradition as a whole.

This assumption, in turn, underpins John M. Foley's theory of traditional referentiality, which holds that the evocation of a particular element that makes up an oral epic song entails the contexts in which that element has previously appeared in the tradition. Foley saw two levels of meaning in any traditional element, such as a formula or a typical scene: the meaning *hic et nunc* and the meaning generated by metonymy: poetic signification. The overlap between these two levels, in turn, makes it possible to recognize the true and full meaning of an element, defined by its term inherent meaning. This mechanism can only be functional if the audience listening to the song is appropriately competent. The audience should recognize the inherent meaning according to the intention of the singer.

Tradition remains the context, however, using Foley's vocabulary, which is enormously larger than a single song. This infinite depth of meaning that an epic singer would refer to during composition in performance was explored by Christos Tsagalis. His analysis of the formula *πεφνζότες ἤντε νεβροί* appearing in the comparisons points to the embedding of mental thought structures at an incredibly deep, subconscious level. This is the pre-verbal *Gestalt* – the image the singer sees in his mind's eye, and a formula such as *πεφνζότες ἤντε νεβροί* is the verbal communication by which the singer evokes the mental image he sees in the visual imagination of his audience.

Understandably, mental images are not perceived with the sense of sight, but are 'seen' with the mind's eye in imagery, i.e. the visual imagination, understood as a mental, multidimensional space in which the human being is capable of perceiving complex pictorial structures. It is to the images that the presumption of presence at the re-created events (*παρὰ τοῖς πράγμασιν*) applies. The imagery system, David Rubin argues,

is the foundation of memory. The visual and spatial nature of imagery allows images to be stored in a multi-dimensional mental space, while when these images interact with each other, the effects of this process can be astonishing. The storage of information in the form of mental images in imagery is also possible because, as laboratory studies have shown, the perception of imaginary objects seen with the 'mind's eye' differs little (or not at all) from the perception of real objects using the sense of sight. Both types of perception involve the same parts of the cerebral cortex. Fundamental to understanding the phenomenon of oral poetry is also the human ability to manipulate mental images.

The use of mental imagery in oral culture is also consistent with one of the most salient features of the oral mind, which is a preference for the concrete and the situation at the expense of the abstract. If the oral singer and the listening audience are indeed perceiving pictorial representations of objects and events in their imagery, then they cannot be abstract *per se* – they must be concrete.

If the above assumptions were to be applicable to the oral epic tradition, traces of imagery mechanisms should be traceable in the surviving texts of epic songs. Egbert Bakker has convincingly shown how the narrative construction of the *Iliad* corresponds to the way people describe the events they observe. Imagery allows for the spatial organisation of content – mental images can be perceived panoramically, that is, visual perception is capable of perceiving multiple objects and events happening simultaneously, while language, especially spoken language and therefore sound, is inextricably linked to the flow of time. The oral singer is therefore faced with a very difficult task – the content, which is organised simultaneously and thus perceived in imagery, must be reproduced in a medium which organises the content sequentially. This transition from one medium to another, and the resulting tension between them, leaves traces in the denotative layer of

the narrative. The best-known trace of this tension in oral epic poetry is the paratactic style, but there are other traces of the phenomenon in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and these are the so-called discourse markers, which have been analysed in detail by Bakker and Anna Bonifazi. Discourse markers suggest a way of perceiving imagery-derived content – they do not attest to the sequentiality of events, but rather signal a process, akin to shifting one's gaze from one image to the next, keeping them (if necessary) simultaneous.

However, it should not be forgotten that the whole process of composition in performance, understood as participation in re-enacted events, is deeply rooted in tradition, i.e. it involves multiple repetitions. In this way, tradition generates a certain stock of mental images that can appear in both similar and different contexts. They may have different functions in the narrative and appear in different narrative situations, but at the level of imagery they are stable. This is well demonstrated in the analysis of similes presented by William Scott. The phenomenon of 'simileme' defined by him, i.e. the underlying metonymic thought structure of each comparison, is the best example of the characteristics of traditional mental images described above. Their metonymic nature emerges from an analysis of the similes in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – the evocation of a given image and its recognition by the audience through multiple repetitions in different contexts does not require all the elements to be evoked each time. Since the *similems* that are part of the similes evoke images that are also present in other parts of the narrative and these images are functional, one can speak of a certain identity with the *Gestalt* phenomenon – both structures, forming conglomerates of subtly related pre-verbal images by means of visual associations, are the basis for the verbal realisation of the various parts of the song, regardless of the theoretical divisions of the narrative e.g. into comparisons, descriptives, speech, etc.

However, the imagery system has its weaknesses, one of which is the sequential organisation of content, so other systems are also involved in the process of epic song composition and transit, supporting memory and contributing to the stability of tradition. One of these is the semantically linked associative series that can be traced in the extant song texts of different traditions – the structures that determine the stability of the places (scenes) typical of the *bylinas*, which Alexander Sabynin observed and described, are also present in the epic tradition of the southern Slavs and in the songs of Homer.

Another mechanism for organising content sequentially are so-called ‘cognitive scripts’, which are mental structures that reflect sequences of related actions based on everyday experience. These structures are also metonymic in nature – if a particular script is well known in a particular tradition, there is no need to explicitly evoke all the events that comprise it. The organisation of content through cognitive scripts certainly speeds up both composition and audience perception of content, so they can be functional tools for the singer to facilitate song composition, and in many cases they certainly were, yet Elizabeth Minchin’s analysis of Homer’s songs in terms of the implementation of cognitive scripts only goes so far in helping us to understand the technique of oral song composition – so what happens in those parts of the narrative that are not based on any script? There is also the temptation to project contemporary theoretical assumptions onto the actual practice of composition, with the result that the sequentiality of described events inherent in verbal communication is unduly privileged, to the detriment of the possibility of their simultaneous perception in imagery. This problem is related to the need to express some structures – those present in imagery – through other structures inherent in verbal messages. Without an understanding of this process, I believe it is impossible to properly understand the compositional techniques of the individual scenes that make up an epic song, because the high stability

of the message in oral culture is due to the involvement of different memory systems, and these systems do not work in isolation from each other, but interact with each other.

This interaction is the subject of Allan Paivio's of dual coding theory. Dual coding involves the interaction of two separate systems, one specialising in the representation and processing of information relating to non-verbal objects and phenomena (imagery) and the other handling language. Both can function separately and independently of each other, but there can also be activation of one system by the other. Paivio characterised the two sources of representation – in imagery it is *imagens* and in the linguistic system it is *logogens*. *Imagens* form simultaneous and hierarchically organised structures and are the source of visual representations, whereas *logogens* are arranged sequentially by association, and since associations can occur between different *logogens*, they form associative networks. Networks of *logogens* can activate a visual representation system, and if this situation is repeated between a given network of *logogens* and a conglomerate of *imagens*, then a 'functional strength' is generated between the two systems.

An analysis of oral epic song should therefore consider the functioning of both systems simultaneously, but with one caveat – mental images are both the source of verbal messages (the singer) and the target domain evoked by those messages (the audience). When both coding systems and the processing between them are taken into account, a different structure emerges from the analysis of, for example, Book XXIII of the Iliad than that which can be discerned by analysing only the realisation of cognitive scripts – the audience's perception of a given narrative is determined by the simultaneity and hierarchical nature of the visualised conglomerates of mental images, rather than by the sequentiality of the linguistic coding system.

The two features of mental imagery mentioned above are essential for a proper understanding of the structure of the

epic song, which cannot be fitted into a rigid pattern 'formula – typical scene – story pattern'. There are parts of the narrative in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, such as the functional descriptions of Achilles' sceptre in Book I of the *Iliad* and Eurykleia in Book I of the *Odyssey*, which are not typical scenes, but evoke traditional pre-verbal conglomerations of *imagens* of a metonymic nature. The metonymic structure allows the singer a certain freedom in the choice of words and formulas, without compromising the stability of the image itself.

The hierarchical and simultaneous nature of mental images is also linked to the phenomenon of their overlapping interference. A particular example of this is the so-called 'paratopic background images', which are superimposed on another image set in the current narrative situation. Such a process occurs when the singer evokes a given paratopic background image by means of associative rows, of which the background-home image is an example. The metonymic nature of such an image allows it to remain stable despite the differences in the denotational level, and through multiple repetitions of associative word series a functional strength is generated between them and the images they evoke. It allows the listening audience, hearing a given verbal message, to see images with the mind's eye, in line with the singer's intention. Paratopic background image can also be functional – for example, the paratopic background-home image in the *Odyssey*, placed constantly in front of the audience's eyes, heightens the tension and anticipation of the climactic scene of the whole song, which is to take place in the space associated with that very image. The association of a given element with a paratopic background image may also serve a function similar to that of nominal attribution in scriptural culture, as is the case with Odysseus' attribution of domestic status to the shepherds or the status of the hero to Demodok in the *Odyssey*.

The special role of imagery in the composition of scenes is also indicated by an analysis of the dynamic mental images

associated with the action of the divine $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$. This seemingly abstract phenomenon in oral culture can only be represented through the presentation of concrete actions and/or the effects of these actions. The multiplicity of repetitions means that a functional strength is generated between the $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$ -linked verbal messages and the images they evoke, which can also influence the context in which the mental image appears. In the *Iliad* there are essentially two types of pictorial representation of the action of $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$, depending on the object with which the singer associates this action. Thus, different images will present the action of $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$ in relation to humans and others in relation to the gods, with the association of an object with a particular domain being determined not by nominal attribution but by association with pictorial representations specific to that domain. An analysis of the *aristeia* of Diomedes in Book V and the *aristeia* of Patroclus in Book XVI of the *Iliad* shows that the object (character) in question is linked to both domains, which determines the way in which they are represented, both in terms of themselves (Patroclus, Diomedes), their antagonists (Aphrodite, Ares) and the actions of $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$ (Patroclus, Ares). Furthermore, there can, and indeed does, occur cross-linkages between certain characters and both domains – the god-Ares anticipates, in relation to himself, the effects of the $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$ of Deus inherent in mortals, and then in a similar way, linked to the domain of human experience, is injured by Diomedes. At the same time, Patroclus is affected by the action of $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$, inherent in the domain of the gods, and then killed in a manner associated with the domain of humans. The cross-relationship with both domains is also evident from the singer's detailed imagery of Patroclus' death – it is twinned with the imagery evoked in the scene of Diomedes' wounding of Ares.

The association of a given object with a particular mental image, made through a verbal message, is done in imagery and understanding this process allows a different view of the essential idea expressed by particular formulas. The

conglomeration of *imagens* evoked in the scene of the four-fold attempted attack by the hero has the effect of equating his status with that of a deity, which is confirmed by the nominal attribution in the form of the formula *δαίμονι ἴσος*. Thus, the essential idea of a formula flows from the essential idea of the mental image to which the formula is linked by means of a functional strength. This assumption changes the understanding of the phenomenon of the epic formula. It may be the case that the same formula can refer to different mental images and therefore can express different essential ideas. This is the case with formulas, linked to the image of fire. The formula *ἀκάματον πῦρ* always occurs under the same metrical conditions, but does not always express the same essential idea. In the oral tradition, 'fire' is not an abstract concept that can be abstracted from a wider context. It is part of a hierarchical and simultaneous structure of pictorial representations that make up a concrete image, which the singer uses the formula *ἀκάματον πῦρ* to express. If the mental image is a hierarchically and symmetrically organised structure, the verbal message expressing it serves to express a structure with such qualities. Only writing creates an illusion in which the constituent elements can be abstracted from such a structure.

The simultaneity and hierarchical nature of the conglomerates present in the imagery of pictorial representations also allows for different types of connections between them. The similarity of the individual images in the *aristeia* of Patroclus and Diomedes does not mean that one scene was composed in imitation of another, but both similar scenes refer to a common source, which is the overall tradition of song culture. At the same time, however, the singer can evoke a given traditional structure and use it functionally to achieve certain narrative goals. Thus the figure of Patroclus may be structurally linked to pictorial representations of the hero's antagonism with the deity, which is deeply rooted in tradition, but at the same time it is functionally linked to the *imagens* evoked in

the death scenes of Achilles, which do not appear in the extant version of the *Iliad* but were certainly present in other songs of the Trojan cycle.

Imagery is therefore the key to understanding particular scenes, as well as the phenomenon of oral epic tradition in general, whose basic mechanism is the transmission of simultaneous and hierarchically organised mental images (*imagens*) through the verbal messages (*logogens*) that express them.

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