



Paolo Galloni, *La memoria e la voce. Un'indagine cognitiva sul medioevo (secoli VI-XII)*, Roma 2013

Alessio Marziali Peretti\*

\* Sapienza Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Studi Europei Americani e Interculturali  
Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Roma – Italia  
(marzialiperetti@gmail.com)

*La memoria e la voce* is one of the rare attempts in the Italian editorial scene of collaboration between cognitive and historical sciences. This volume launches the new book series of romance philology and linguistics titled *Orizzonti medievali*, in line with the editorial objective of “uno sguardo rivolto ora al centro dei nostri studi ora verso la periferia e al di là dei confini”. The main perspective is, in effect, historical, focusing especially on Germanic and Anglo-Saxon texts, with brief references to romance studies, related to, in particular, *chansons de geste* and Arthurian romances.

The book begins with a brief account of the latest findings in cognitive sciences regarding memory, emotions, narrativity and their connections. Because of these, “*l’uomo sapiens sapiens è un animale storico*”, with a strong biological inclination for analyzing and interpreting the past, and for creating an individual and collective memory. However, Galloni posits the existence of a “frattura cognitiva” between modern information society and High Medieval oral culture that limits our knowledge of the past. Most academic historiography he bitterly criticizes tends to adopt purely analytical and objective methods, achieving an “anestetica” representation of the past. By contrast, High Medieval men's historical reconstruction was strongly connected to a voice culture, which drew from both oral and written sources, without favouring a chronicle over a *chanson de geste*, or a textual record over a “reliable” personal testimony. During High Middle Ages “convivevano, e si influenzavano reciprocamente, due paradigmi - da un lato una storia latina, finalistica, scritta, e dall’altro una vernacolare, poetica, orale e meno attenta alla cronologia lineare - e due tipologie di specialisti - che potremmo definire alfabetizzati e performativi.”

The research on vocality of Paul Zumthor, which the title *La memoria e la voce* explicitly alludes to, becomes an essential part of Galloni's suggestion of paying more attention to the bodily quality of Medieval texts as avocatory of a vocal, gestural and bodily background. From this perspective, the voice is to be considered as "un particolare tipo di unità somatica, un'espressione del corpo che raggiunge e stimola i sensi di chi ascolta". The medieval singer gave voice to the characters of *chansons de geste* bringing them back to life with his bodily performance.

The primacy of the voice brought about many consequences. Composing and reading a written text, for instance, were certainly influenced by acting techniques typical of orality. However, Galloni points out that the reciprocal influence between writing and vocality would lead to a phenomenon he terms "oralità testuale", "una modalità di organizzazione delle informazioni provenienti dalla scrittura secondo procedure ancora dipendenti da strutture cognitive orali." The oral narrative is characterized by definite basic elements, such as interchangeability and expansion of narrative themes, chronological contraction, recurrences of formulaic and catalogical passages.

These elements can be usually found in several High Medieval texts, so many times that it can only be explained, according to Galloni, by connecting it to the "oralità testuale". The influence of the cognitive mechanisms closely connected to the primacy of orality was unavoidable even when professional writers, the so-called "comunità testuali", controlled the culture. On the other hand, without considering the exceptional Irish case in which there is an almost perfect correspondence of clerical and poet figures (*fili*), there are many well-known cases in which, for instance, monks were blamed for enjoying stories or songs in vernacular languages. Galloni examines its consequences in some unclear recurring expressions of the chronicles, which can be only understood in relation to the traditional formulas of the *chansons de geste*.

In addition to these observations that frame the book, the author addresses some specific themes. One chapter describes landscape as a cognitive, mnemonic and narrative map, "parte di un contesto storico, che, più correttamente, andrebbe concettualizzato come *non-testo* [...], nel senso che la testualità vi svolgeva un ruolo secondario o minoritario. Il paesaggio era intriso di racconti e i racconti di paesaggio." Other chapters analyze the influence of the "oralità testuale" in specific genres or in the construction of historical-literary characters, such as king Arthur.

Providing textual clues, historical data, anthropological elements and toponymy, Galloni attempts to reconstruct what is outside the text, those cognitive maps that would distinguish "ora da allora". As happens regularly for every study dealing with an already lost orality, results can only be

hypothetical. Several clues demonstrate that something existed, but without clearly indicating what it was. So, for instance, there are several clues of the *Chanson de Roland* prior to the Oxford manuscript draft which celebrates its enormous success: let's consider the sentence formulated by the so-called Limousin Astronomer only few decades after the historical event, in which he affirms that he doesn't mention the names of those who marched in the rearguard "quia uulgata sunt". However, it can be only supposed how dynamic was this oral tradition and how much it changed during the two centuries between the historical event and the Oxford manuscript draft, or if omissions and new insertions were connected to circumstantial explanations, for instance political or propagandist ones, more than to literary or cognitive motivations, but also the importance of this tradition in the collective imaginary can be only hypothesized. Even if Galloni hardly cares about hypothetical reconstructions, there is no doubt that the peculiarity of orality and its consequences are connected to lost forms which can't be entirely recovered.

Moreover, it might be useful to classify all orality clues on the basis of diachronic and diatopic criteria. It can be convenient, for instance, to estimate how much of the phenomenon could be reconstructed in a specific historical moments rather than in another, and, similarly, to draw a map of the peculiarities of orality. Being interested in the Irish area, as mentioned above, Galloni notices a remarkable correspondence between the figures of the cleric and the poet, but the phenomenon was without doubt specific in those areas which were not actually controlled by the Christian "Orthodoxy" (with all problems this definition entails for the High Middle Ages). Elsewhere the proximity between clerics and poets was discouraged with much more intensity and in these contexts it could be possible to find a different degree of penetration of orality. It may be useful to establish a systematic organization of the clues and of the indirect evidences to define accurately the limits of a phenomenon that now can only be considered like an echo of unrecoverable voices.