MASTERS OF TRUTH IN THE MIDDLE-EARTH OR THE WORLDS OF FANTASY AS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF DETIENNE'S THEORY

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It seems reasonable to begin the considerations concerning orality in fantastic literature with some introductory remarks on the subject, the scope as defined by source material selected, and, finally, some methodological issues involved. Let us start with the subject: what I intend to consider is the survival of certain cultural correlates of orality, such as the belief in privileged transmission, singer's omniscience, veracity and performative powers of poetic speech (song as reflective of the real). In the essence, one could say that I intend to search for Detienne's *masters of truth* (as originally defined in his *Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce antique*, 1967[1]) in the worlds created by the fantasy authors.

Next, the scope: to keep within the editorial limits of the periodical I intend, naturally enough, to start with the work considered a cornerstone of modern fantasy *genre*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *opus magnum*, i.e. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the associated works (principally the *Silmarillion*)[2]. They will remain the central focus of my considerations throughout that essay, even though some references will be made e.g. to the works

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[1] The references, for clarity's sake, are to the English translation by J. Lloyd, i.e. *The Masters of Truth in ancient Greece*.

[2] Due to an excessive number of existing editions, references to both J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. LeGuin are traced to chapters only. As for Tolkien's works, I employed the 2001 HarperCollins edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, digital (Kindle) edition of *The Silmarillion*. For LeGuin's works I have employed the digital (Kindle) editions.

of an anthropologist who became a fantasy writer – Ursula LeGuin, Lyndon Hardy's *Master of Five Magics* (1980), a work consciously and openly alluding to its own character of quest narrative, and then to Ann McCaffrey's hybrid extravaganza, that is the *Dragonriders* series (to be precise, to the most widely known installment of the series i.e. the *Dragonflight* [1968]). The use of such varied and stylistically different material will, I hope, demonstrate certain continuity existing throughout the genre as such, a continuity quite clearly linked to traditional filiations of fantasy.

Finally, on the methodological point: my interest lies in the position of spoken word in the worlds of *fantasy*, not necessarily in the presence of oral transmission in fantastic universes or the employment of elements known from the existing remnants of the oral epoch in the fantasy genre.

Let me begin by briefly explaining what I am looking for: as convincingly demonstrated by Detienne, oral societies tend to privilege certain kinds of speech over everyday talk; it is especially prominent in the case of royal decrees (including lawgiving, acts of judgment, etc.), ritual and magical formulae, and, last but not least, poetic speech. Effectively, both kings and poets (to these two classes one can add priests and mages) speak truly and truthfully, the world being correspondent to the reality woven with their words. In a simplified version, we could say that in the case of kings, priests and mages, world in a way adjusts to their words (a law creates reality much in the same manner an incantation does), while the poet speaks the truth about the world as this latter is: the performative force of kingly (magical) speech finds its counterpart in the descriptive truthfulness of the poet. They both manifest an unusual level of knowledge as both king and poet seem privy to the rules governing the universe, to the divine wisdom – in poetry, this is manifested by Muse inspired omniscience, in royal decrees and commands – by the adaptation of the universal rule, by implementation of justice as translated into the mortal terms[3]. Thus, to invoke an ancient example, Hesiod's famed encounter with the Muses on Mount Helicon in the opening verses of the *Theogony* (v. 22-35) is a vivid illustration of his

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[3] On the issue cf. respectively Detienne 1996: 39-67, J.-P. Vernant 2006: 115--139. Some important observations are also made in two studies of Hesiodic poetry: J.M. Duban 1980, and K.B. Stoddard 2003. For the efficacy and performative force of magical speech c.f. H.S. Versnel 2002.

superior status, of the fact that his knowledge (and, hence, his words) is true and infallible. On the other hand, the kings, at least according to Homer, are descended from Zeus himself, the ultimate ruler of the universe, whose word equals law among the immortals. It is striking that this superior position of both the king and the lawgiver survives in Plato, though the supreme knowledge belongs to philosophers alone while poets (together with other practitioners of the imitative arts) are relegated to the sixth place, the displacement manifest in the *Phaedrus* (248c-249b).

Let us consider the Tolkien's universe as described in the *LOTR* trilogy. The world is quite manifestly removed from orality, writing being of paramount importance in the story (witness the inscription on the ring itself); yet, even at the most superficial level, the presence of song and the songs' importance within the framework of the story is remarkable. When in need of proof, the characters within the story are wont to quote poems; poems are also used for prophesying and credited with imparting truth even when the words themselves remain unrecognizable. The last phenomenon can be illustrated by invoking the example of Legolas as he listens to Aragorn's rendition of the *Song of Eorl* (in the *King of the Golden Hall* chapter of the *Two Towers*). Though incapable of understanding the language of the Rohirrim, the age-old elf remarks: *I cannot guess what it means, save that it is laden with the sadness of the Mortal Men.* Strikingly, this is the same impression that is conveyed by the wording itself: *Where is the horse and the Rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?* Such is the power of the song that the truth about the sadness of passing, the pain of human limitedness and ephemerality permeates its melody so that it is communicated to the immortal being. The semantic content is thus imparted even without the recipient being cognizant of the actual language in which the poem was composed, truth being in a way self-revealing in the very arrangement of its constitutive elements.

Let us however consider the more obvious instances of song's truthfulness: this will be probably best illustrated by some of the songs featuring in the tales of the *Silmarillion*. Thus, for example, the tale of Beren (ch. 19: *Of Beren and Lúthien*) tells a story of the elven king, Finrod, battling his great adversary, Sauron Gorthaur. As they duel, Finrod sings about the world's origin, about the birth of Valinor and the beauty that once existed. His song is true, the image conveyed is one of innocence and perfection, and,

for a time, he is able to stave off Sauron's fury – yet, he loses. The important point is that this loss is directly connected to both the nature of the song and to its truthfulness: as the tale unravels, he reaches the point of rift, loss of innocence, end of an era, i.e. the slaughter in Alqualonde. The logic of the song, its truthfulness dictate that he must reach this point, its very nature making it impossible to circumvent the danger, or, indeed, to lie: effectively, the song retains its power as long as it is true, but in being true it defeats its own purpose, thus translating into Finrod's defeat much as the slaughter caused the exile of the Noldor race. Ironically, the song he sings appears to be the same which served to unite elves and men during their first encounter – as Felagund encounters the recently born humans, he conciliates their hearts with the 'cosmological' narrative (ch. 12: *Of Men*). Considering the image from the theoretical standpoint we may easily see the historical parallel: this is the Sumerian celebration of new year, with its recitation of *Enuma Elish*, the near paradigmatic instance of common experiencing of shared history, with the figure of singer serving as a pivot and a founding stone of (human) society. Furthermore, this cosmic song employed with such a skill by the elven king may – precisely because of its essential truthfulness – be taken to form the direct reflection of the song of Eru, true in virtue of its creative power. The song of Eru, as we remember, brings forth the universe as it is, shaping all that the world is (one cannot but think of the affinities with the creative effort of the poet/writer). No note can be false in the sense of not being/becoming true: all that is sung reflects Iluvatar's plan and nothing remains without its 'real' counterpart (cf. ch. 1: *Of the Beginning of Days*). Yet, let us return to the meeting between Finrod and men. Its importance appears twofold: while the song is employed for the conciliating character of its melody (in keeping with the old Pythagorean principle that music can be employed to modify behavior), the author's emphasis is on the content. Apparently, during this fateful meeting, Finrod endows the mortals with knowledge of shared origin, imparting to them a sense of what is shared, and hence, of community (hence, of the Greek *koinon*). In doing this, he provides men with experience of the past, experience considered crucial in shaping the group identity[4]. Hence, he effectively performs the defining

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[4] One is thus reminded of the non-societal character of the *Odyssey*'s Lotophagi as described by Pierre Vidal-Naquet 1998: 39-60 – with no memory of past events,

duty of the singer. Hardly surprisingly, the future fates of men remain linked to those of the elven folk, the development of human civilization following upon this original encounter. Nothing could be more removed from this than the human experience with Morgoth's servants, stealthily abducting men into the night in order to torture their bodies into a new, misshapen shape. The truth of Finrod's song serves to unite and empower, while those in the shade of Utumno appear denied the benefits of sage speech.

Now, for the singer's privileged epistemic status and his superior understanding: let us consider the famous victory banquet of *The Return of the King*, held upon the completion of Frodo's long quest (*The Field of Cormallen*): the ring has been destroyed, the two hobbits are reunited with other members of the Fellowship: they are, effectively, newly returned from Mordor, with no chance to exchange news or story of their long toils and labors. Yet, at the banquet, a minstrel stands up to sing a tale of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Power. This is the tale Samwise dreamt about, the tale of their quest which, simultaneously forms an important (not to say crucial) part of the *LOTR* trilogy (indeed, in a way, the minstrel sings the *LOTR* tale, which contributes to the irony of the situation: the tale is ultimately told by a highly literate Oxford don). How does the minstrel know the entirety of the story described in the tale, we never learn: yet, in a striking repetition of the famed scene of the *Odyssey*, the two protagonists of the quest are suddenly put in direct contact with their own legend: in fact they are immortalized before their own eyes, their fame assuring them a place in human and elvish memory. Effectively, their efforts became the part of the Middle-Earth sung history (this is a step of paramount importance as the narrator of *The Silmarillion* frequently 'invokes' the authority of a poetic source in order to assert the truth of his own narrative[5]). It is precisely to such a song that King Theoden aspires in his defense of Helm's Deep, as he leads his exhausted troops into what he deems to be the last battle: as confirmed by his words, their hope is to die in a manner that deserves

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they have no sense of shared past, no thought beyond the present, and hence they experience no feeling of community.

[5] This is particularly manifested in chapter 19: *Of Beren and Lúthien*.

its own song, i.e. memory (*Helm's Deep*)[6]. This is particularly striking given the immortalizing function of the song as understood in the ancient society – equaling memory, its truthfulness bestows light and remembrance, glory and recognition, the only kind of immortality available to a mortal being[7]. Invoking another aspect of the same pattern, in the chapter *Treebeard* Fangorn informs Merry and Pippin that hobbits (as such) have made it into the song of ents, this particular tale being carefully (and after much consideration) adapted to newly acquired knowledge. Containing within itself all the information about the Middle-earth, the song of ents reflects the truth of the world. Given this exhaustive descriptiveness, it is improper to be 'hasty' in introducing any changes to its wording: after all,the song's purpose is to reflect andmirror the actual Middle-earth[8].

As I have said above, according to Detienne, *aletheia* is a quality manifested not only by the poetic, but also by the royal speech. In Tolkien's work the tendency is exemplified in the persons of Aragorn and Faramir, two direct descendants of Numenor kings – it is inconceivable that they lie, a fact underlined by Faramir's behavior with regard to the ring (*The Window on the West*)[9]. Throughout the story, the same holds true of Aragorn, whose

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[6] His actual words are as follows (the highlight is mine): "The end will not be long. (…) But I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap. Snowbane and Hasufel and the horses of my guard are in the inner court. When dawn comes, I will bid men sound Helm's horn, and I will ride forth. Will you ride with me then, son of Arathorn? Maybe we shall cleave a road, or m a k e s u c h a n e n d a s w i l l b e w o r t h a s o n g – i f a n y b e l e f t t o s i n g o f u s h e r e a f t e r" (Tolkien 2001: 527).

[7] On the truthfulness as memory etc. c.f. Detienne 1996: 45-51; on the immortalizing aspect of memory c.f. M. Clarke 2004: 74-90.

[8] Interestingly, the image of ent-song, the all-encompassing account of all that exists, returns in much later work of Don Sakers *All Fall Down* (1988). The memory keeping, song-immortalized hlutr, one notes, are the only beings capable of producing and modifying genetic code, a fact that enables them to save all world from death.

[9] Their false counterparts, Boromir and Denethor, both fail, and in both cases the failure relates to their complicated relationship with the truth, most particularly the truth of their own position and of ancient alliances. First and foremost, both father and son experience considerable strain when dealing with the truth

word appears to be his bond. The rule is best put by Denethor's younger son himself: *We are truth-speakers, we men of Gondor* (2001: 665). Standing at the opposite end, among the villains of the land of Rohan, Saruman as well as his servant, Grima the Wormtongue, are both characterized by their deceitfulness and extreme dislike of truth (effectively, even Saruman's clothes prove to be a lie). In this, they contrast with the general populace of Rohan, the Rohirrim, possibly most vividly with the royal prince Eomer, who in a manner befitting a future king appears to scorn all subterfuge. Significantly, he also proves extremely quick to recognize the true worth of Aragorn and his companions, extending to them the generosity that would be in keeping of any Homeric *agathos* (*The Riders of Rohan*).

Another characteristic quality of the kingly speech lies in its ability to reconcile men, to settle quarrels and end disagreements: interestingly, this particular quality manifests itself mostly through its absence from the speech of the 'failed' figures: Grima is notorious for inciting discord among the Rohirrim, while Denethor displays a marked preference for confrontation and furthering the discontent (witness his combative stance toward Gandalf the White or his own son). The same failing manifests itself in the (in)famous figures of *The Silmarillion*'s villains: Curufin or Maeglin: both seek to exploit the potential reservations, disillusionment, furthering discord and discontent whenever they get a chance. One may also note that the first, the most accomplished (and quite possibly the most dangerous) of all dragons, villainous and cruel Glaurung, appears to derive considerable pleasure from the strife and catastrophes he incites through his false (or semifalse) pronouncements: one may in fact say that his lies prove as destructive as his physical might (*Turin Turambar*). In this he mirrors, on much larger scale, the pattern of fallen Saruman in the final chapters

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of stewardship, while misconstruing the true nature of the ring. Then, deceived by dark visions and crushed by the demise of his elder son, Denethor falsely believes himself to stand alone even when he is surrounded by allies: it comes as no surprise that he ends by failing to evaluate the truth of his son's chances of survival and effectively confuses two most direct oppositions, i.e. life and death, in attempting to bury his living son. Boromir falls victim to much similar deceit (believing himself the only true savior of his land), even though at the end of his life he proves himself able to recognize his own error.

of *The Return of the King*. Obviously, the most successful liar and destroyer is Morgoth himself: his ability to foster and encourage distrust affects the whole world: the oath of Feanor with its deadly consequences results directly from Morgoth cunningly undermining his trust in the Valar and their word (ch. 7-9). Strikingly, his fall comes with his reluctance to follow the original song, to accept the truth of the world – misled by his ambition, he seeks to pervert the song (thus anticipating the perversion of humans and elves and the creation of orcs). The song, however, remains true, despite the dissonances – as willed by Iluvatar, this is the World-Song, all of Middle-earth contained within its glory (ch. 1: *Of the Beginning of Days*).

When speaking of royal liars, it is particularly interesting that the two elder sons of Feanor, Maedhros and Maglor, who in fact may be considered as illustrations of the two facets of true speech (one displaying the virtues of the king, the other of the poet[10]), are notably less prone to quarrel and disruptive behavior that their younger brothers. They are also shown to possess particularly deep understanding of the power of words. This is not to say that they are completely alien to falsehood: yet, even through the haze of Morgoth's falsehoods and the fatal lure of the Silmarils they are occasionally able to rise to the prior innocence and virtue (particularly true of Maedhros in ch. 13: *Of the Return of the Noldor,* ch. 24: *Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath*). Moreover, in contrast to their brothers they retain some awareness of their true circumstance, a feeling of being both trapped and defined by Feanor's impossible demands.

Among the humans, the disruptive character of false speech comes to the fore in the tale of Numenor: the fall of the once proud realm is manifestly connected to the actions of Sauron, whose duplicitous speech results in the kings gradually rejecting all that is true about the world, most importantly the truth of Valar existence. The same actions cause a massive rift among the Numenor nobles, resulting in internal disquiet and strife.

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[10] By contrast, Finrod unifies the two roles, being both a true king and a true singer. In the case of Maedhros and Maglor the roles appear disjunct, with Maedhros displaying virtues more easily connected with the royal figure (magnanimity, valor), while Maglor is the one endowed with the gift of song (it is hardly the accident that the two will end up connected to two opposite elements: Maedhros with fire/earth, Maglor with water).

Thus, the last kings are shown to renege on their most crucial obligation: the duty to recognize and proliferate truth: choosing the false, they lose the very characteristic that motivates the order: the ability to settle rising disputes: instead they further and encourage discord.

Having briefly considered the nature and instances of privileged speech as observed in Tolkien's Middle-earth universe, let us consider some examples from the texts fathered by other authors. Clearly, due to its origin, the genre most openly involved with the orality is the heroic fantasy, participating as it does in the great legacy of epic narrations of the past. Yet, for most of our heroes, the word has already discovered writing. In his own world, LeGuin's Ged is manifestly able to consult libraries: yet, in the very same world, a place exists where a written word is rejected in favor of oral transmission. The dreaded darkness of the Unnamed Gods beneath the tombs of Atuan can be penetrated either with light (unsafe) or with knowledge (much safer), the latter being passed in unchanged line of succession from the Arrah, the priestess of the Unnamed, to the High Priestess and then back to Arrah as the latter returns reborn. The cult is manifestly old, almost primeval. The lone, virginal priestess remains the only one to know the mysteries of the underworld labyrinth until two people penetrate the darkness – the first is Ged, on his quest to recover (or reunite) a powerful artifact, the other – a sacrilegious priestess on a mission to increase her own standing. The intrusion manifests itself through the presence of light and use of sight, thus mimicking the passage into the era of writing. Yet, in the very same universe, the spoken word appears to have retained its effective, performative or binding power: it is by learning the true name of his adversary that Ged is able to defeat both the dragon and the shadow (*A Wizard of Earthsea*) or, in a more innocent setting, to summon rabbit to the fire (*The Tombs of Atuan*).

In a vivid contrast to the word-centered universe of the Earthsea, in the world portrayed in the *Hain* trilogy people are able to communicate by thought alone, thus complicating the resulting picture. Still, the chief difference between all forms of intelligence and the race of Shinga is that the latter possess ability to lie, an ability nearly inconceivable in the world of mind communication (after all, Rocannon's gift to his world includes an ability to return to primeval innocence). It is Rolery – a transgressional character par excellence, a girl born out of season, an individuality standing out among her kin due to her inquisitiveness and self-reliance – that

unknowingly carries a gift destined to save humankind. This young woman, whose unusual, foreign marriage originated a merger between star travelers and the indigenous race of Hain (a race which, one notes, does not know the art of singing (nor, for that matter, writing)[11], leaves to her descendants the ability to (re)recognize falsehood.

A feature somewhat similar to that attested in *The Tombs of Atuan*, that is certain uniqueness linked to the oral way of transmission, manifests itself in Lyndon Hardy's *Master of Five Magics*. The most openly feared and despised among various magical disciplines which the hero, Alodar, needs to study in his quest to save the kingdom (and to defeat the demon prince) is that of sorcery. This is the art of illusion and enchantment, employed for purposes of entertainment and far-seeing, but most famous for the reviled power of possession: it is capable of creating zombie-like, near unbeatable warriors, hollow men immune to pain, guided by sorcerer's vision alone. No man voluntarily looks a sorcerer in the eye: the practitioner of this particular art stands isolated, both dreaded and shunned, a solitary figure almost universally feared by his kin[12]. In Hardy's world a sorcerer makes things appear real (this is quite important: it is not that he shapes or creates reality – instead his power lies in distortion and falsehood, in numbing the senses or making men believe what is not true). And of all magical disciplines, only sorcery and wizardry demand payment: for wizardry, the payment lies in revealing yourself to the demonic. For sorcery however, the danger is far more insidious: it is both addictive and life-consuming, since the distortion of reality is achieved only through the investment of sorcerer's life-force (by contrast, the subjugation of a demon comes at the cost of a demon learning something of its summoner's weakenesses). Thus, the falsehood is paid in real life: in an striking conversion, this again is the truth principle at work – a believable lie comes at the cost of life-span, a distortion of reality is paid inwhat is true.

Additionally, one notes that in Hardy's magic filled and literate world, which seems full of books, libraries, manuals and written instruction, sorcery relies on purely oral transmission of knowledge, on a direct interaction

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[11] Among the complaints raised by the 'farborn' about Rolery, one concerns her allegedly uncivilized origins and illiteracy (ch. 13).

[12] Part Four: *The Sorcerer*, most emphatically in ch. 13: *Illusions of the Court*.

between master and apprentice (to be exact, between an unwilling master and a foolhardy apprentice, as duly noted by the royal sorcerer, Kelric). This contrasts with the study of magic: magicians, whose word and action retains the power to affect and shape reality, while being endowed with a capacity to create artifacts of immense power, rely on libraries. The discipline clearly retains the connection between speech and physical world (the *true* speech), but remains bizarrely dependent on the written word, meanwhile the sorcery prefers the privileged nature of transmission, while also suffering the crippling consequences of dabbling in falsehood.

Let me finally turn to yet another literate and technologically advanced (far more than its inhabitants know) world: in the *Dragonflight*, many answers are sought in the libraries of Weyr. Yet, quite strikingly, when these answers come, they quite often rely on something unwritten, or even on a song. They come from the *Ballad of Moreta*, spontaneously recited by Lessa after some off-hand comment made by F'lar, or, most impressively, from the bizarre song on the departure of the Weyrs, sung by Masterharper (and thus, a master singer) Robinton. The latter song preserves a memory of a sudden parting, tantalizes the mind with its bizarre cadence and wording – it is unforgettable, in fact, it is composed in order never to be forgotten. And true enough, it furnishes an indication of course to be taken and already taken in the past. The *true* is well defined in the tale: it is a song that was composed with a single intention. Its purpose is to bring Lessa to the Ruatha-that-was, to draw someone from the future back into the remote past in order to enable a feat that was once completed. One notices that in the world of high literacy, the necessary information was entrusted to song, not to writing – and it had to be a song in order to remain intact and unsolved for four hundred years. A trained eye quickly notes that the other piece of the puzzle is a tapestry, a woven piece of cloth: in the face of the association between speech and weaving (which has been frequently investigated by the anthropologist schools), no other pairing would be more fitting[13]. The two, speech and fabric, form a mutually dependent system, designed to serve a purpose far more important for the information to be cloaked in any other form. Thus, in her own, unique, way, Anne McCaffrey subscribes again to the notion

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[13] On the subject cf. e.g. G. Ferrari (1997).

of privileged speech, even if this time it comes only (and what only it is) as a communication device.

As manifested in this brief overview, the *true speech* in its various guises features quite often in the fantasy genre. This tendency to privilege or illuminate oral transmission, to rely on non written word as well as to endow the spoken word with a particular performative force sits well with fantasy as a successor of both epic and fable. At the same time it reflects an old custom of celebrating the poet as a purveyor of true, inspired knowledge, a tendency that gained a new momentum with the arrival of Romanticism and its admiration for the *Volk* and the *Volkslieder*. To enumerate all the ways in which contemporary fantasy writers exploit the concept of *true speech* in their works and to ascertain the scope of this tendency would be far beyond the limits of this article: having indicated some of the possibilities I have hopefully provided a reader with a starting point for further and more detailed considerations.

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Masters of Truth in the Middle-Earth: Perceiving the Worlds of Fantasy through the Lens of Detienne's Theory

The essay analyzes the importance of true speech (as described in M. Detienne's *Les Maîtres de Vérité*) in epic fantasy. Starting with J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth, through Lyndon Hardy's magical worlds, Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* and AnnMcCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series, speech carries an added value of truth, preserving and shaping the universe in turn – such understanding of privileged speech links modern fantasy literature to its ancient models (Homer or Hesiod).

Keywords: orality, privileged speech, performative act, memory, epic fantasy