MATEUSZ MIKOŁAJ KŁAGISZ

Oral Character of Middle Persian Literature – New Perspective

Abstract

From the very beginning oral transmission of texts played a significant role in the Iranian world. It became a main topic of several works by Bailey (1943), Boyce (1957, 1968), de Menasce (1973), Skjærvø (1384hš), Smurzyński (2006) and Tafazzoli (1378hš). In my paper I try to depict the problem of orality in Middle Persian literature once again, but this time using some tools developed by Ong.

On the other hand, it is highly likely that at least the "obscurity" is addressed to works of the 9th century that also contain material which at one time was transmitted orally, but which themselves were products of a written culture. Their style is difficult because the authors wrote in long, complicated sentences. Most of these sentences are in no way adopted to be transmitted by heart.

Key words Middle Persian, literature, orality, influence

In this article I would like to deal with the problem of orality and its influence on the formal structure of written Middle Persian texts. I use the adjective 'written' deliberately because most of Middle Persian texts, that we have at our disposal now, existed originally as unwritten and only later were written down. Paradoxically, it means that we are able to gain some information about orality literature only from some printed sources.

The question of orality (and literacy) was elaborated by different Orientalists, but in my paper I am using Walter Jackson Ong's method of analysis of texts existing first of all as acoustic waves.[1] From this point of view, my paper is situated within the framework of today's research on pre-Islamic literature in Iran but offers a new perspective. I must

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[1] Ong 1967; Ong 1978: 58, pp. 1–7; Ong 1988 [2011]. Ong's theoretical description of the oral text is partially based on the researches carried out by Milman Perry (1902–1935) who in the 30s. of the 20th century suggested that the structure of Homeric epic is a characteristic feature of oral composition. Although the conceptions of

add that most of the comments (completing, I do hope, to some degree our previous knowledge about orality in Iranian culture) collected in this article occurred to me while reading Prods Oktor Skjærvø's article *The Importance of Orality for the Study of Old Iranian Literature and Myth* (1384hš), Philip Huyse's text *Late Sasanian Society between Orality and Literacy* (2008),[2] and Ong's book *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (2011).[3]

From the beginning, the Zoroastrians, always had great respect for sound. This must have been a belief they shared with the Indians (who consider a simple syllable *om* to be a seed from which the Universe has come into being), and that they had inherited from their Indo-Iranian ancestors. This great respect for sound results, to some degree, from the religion, because according to the Zoroastrian doctrine the Universe itself was created by the great *Ahunwar* prayer. In regard to Judaism, Christianity and some other religions, Zoroastrianism considers sound as a religious tool. In Middle Persian writings we can read that:

> *zīndag gōwšnīg saxwan az ān ī pad nibišt mādagwardar hangārdan čimīg.*[4]

> It is reasonable to consider the living spoken word more important than the written.[5]

For us, people living in a highly typographic culture, this simultaneous prominence given to sound and disregard for a written word can appear as something unusual or even odd. Despite the fact that our entire life is filled with words – first spoken, later also written, we may have difficulty imagining that we live in a world lacking "printed sounds". As Ong[6] noticed, this strong letter-oriented attitude stands in our way when we come across texts that exist only as an acoustic wave. Our writing-and-typography-oriented mind influences our perception of the word, and places us in opposition to some

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Ong are well known to today's Orientalists the only Iranist who mentions this researcher in his article is Huyse 2008: 152.

  [2]   Huyse explains in his article that the topic of orality and literacy was dealt with by him at far greater length in his unpublished PhD thesis (Paris, 2003) and that he is going to present the complete material in a revised and extended monograph (Huyse 2008: 154; footnote no. 1). Unfortunately, this monograph has not been published yet.

  [3]   As far as I know the Brill Publishing House is going to publish Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World – a collection of articles regarding orality and literacy in the Iranian world by Julia Rubanovich and Shaul Shaked. About orality in New Persian literature see: Rubanovich 2012: 653–679.

  [4]   Boyce 1968a: 35.

  [5]   Boyce 1968a: 35. How different sounds a *Šâhnâme* story of devs who begged Tahmurath to spare their lives and who, in exchange, promised to teach him a beneficial art of writing.

  [6]   Walter Jackson Ong (1912–2003) – an American Jesuit priest, historian and philosopher, one of the most important scholars interested in orality, oral composition and output.

nations taking pride in rich and varied oral literary traditions like the Hotentots, though "oral literary tradition" seems not to be a very proper term, because:

> Thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as 'oral literature' is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels.[7]

Middle Persian literature is a good example of such artistic production that used to come to light mostly in the form of joyful sounds produced by *gōsān* – Middle Persian singer, *rāmišgar* and *huniyāgar* – Middle Persian musician, and *mōwbēd*s – Zoroastrian clergymen. This unquestionable strongly oral character of Middle Persian literature caused, according to today's readers (and some scholars), one of its most surprising features: conciseness, emotionlessness, stylistic weakness and unattractiveness:

> The style is terse, even dry, especially in the religious texts, while now and then it is even vague and incomprehensible.[8]

We may claim that Otokar Klíma based his opinion on a simple belief that the principal form of literature is any written or printed one. As Skjærvø points out, this inability to imagine ourselves in an oral poet's place caused that we cannot think about an oral composition without comparing it with a more natural, according to us, written one.[9] This problem refers not only to Middle Persian literature but, on the Iranian ground, also to the *Avesta*. A typical example of that literacy-oriented approach are Ilya Gershevich's words about the *Widēwdād*:

> Unfortunately, the enjoyment in reading it is marred by two serious flaws: one is the disturbing negligence in respect of what according to older Avestan standards are correct inflectional endings; the other consists in the deadly pedantry which obsesses the authors and leads them to dreary repetitions and hair-splitting classifications.[10]

He based his statement about the stylistic values of the *Widēwdād* on a firm and solid foundation of a written tradition, forgetting (probably) that the *Avesta* was written down a long time after it had been composed. Nevertheless, one can also come across opposite views, such as Jehangir C. Tavadia's who claimed that:

> Über den stilistischen und inhaltlichen Wert dieser Texte kann man verschiedener Meinung sein, aber im übrigen sind die Pahlavī-Werke nicht so schlecht – auch stilistisch nicht –, wie sie oft nach den Übersetzungen erscheinen.[11]

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[7] Ong 1988: 12.
[8] Klíma 1963: 1–65.
[9] Skjærvø 1384hš: 11–12.
[10] Gershevitch 1968: 1–30.
[11] Tavadia 1956: 31.

This discrepancy in the opinions about Middle Persian literature shows that the phenomenon of orality in the Iranian world can still absorb our minds. No wonder that it was noticed by a few scholars including Mary Boyce:

> In these Pahlavi works the influence of the oral tradition of literature is plain. One of the characteristics of this it is largely anonymous. Another is that, though the tradition, as a whole is immensely conservative (...), yet in all but the most sacred texts adaptations and additions were made in the course of transmission. (...) These characteristics: anonymity, and free adaptation, and addition are found also in the written literature, which throughout the Sasanian period is still very much the dependent child of the oral tradition.[12]

Researchers frequently emphasize(d) that orality requires not only a different means of storing the text – memorization, a different place of storage – memory, but also different patterns of composing, and, in contrast to written literature, two actors: a story-teller and, at least, one listener:

> Since in pre-Islamic Iran a tradition of oral transmission was very strong, most of Middle Persian literary works have never been written down, and most of the texts that have been recorded belong to the Islamic period, when New Persian language replaced finally its older form – Middle Persian, and the Arabic script replaced the Middle Persian one (...).[13]

> (...) the texts were transmitted orally, yet, the oral nature of the composition and transmission of the texts has only recently led Iranian scholars to apply the methodologies of the study of oral literature to the *Avesta*, especially the so-called *Gāθās of Zarathustra*.[14]

Boyce, who confirmed her previous statement in her text about Middle Persian literature in the *Handbuch der Orientalistik*:

> Zoroastrian literature, having existed for centuries as a purely oral phenomenon, retained in its written stage variously characteristically oral types of composition. Further, a number of individual works appear to be simply oral products of considerable antiquity, which were finally, because of some religious connotations, thought worthy of record in writing. The Sasanian books thus preserve elements from a yet older epoch, and provide a remarkable bridge between two phases of Persian composition,[15]

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[12] Boyce1968b: 4.
[13] Tafazzoli 1376hš: 111.
[14] Skjærvø 1384hš: 9.
[15] Boyce 1968a: 31–32; cf. Boyce 1979: 126.

like Jean de Menasce or Marek Smurzyński, belonged to those scholars who were trying to discuss the problem of *horror scripturae* in the Iranian word.

Smurzyński claimed that this peculiar function of Middle Persian oral *mimesis* resulted from the Avestan denial of the written word in favor of magic of the spoken one.[16] Meanwhile, de Menasce explored that issue from the perspective of a problem which should have been solved by the first Muslim scholars and theologians: Do Zoroastrians really have their own sacred book? and: Should they be recognized as *ahl al-kitāb* 'People of the (sacred and revealed) Book', or not? Since for centuries the Zoroastrians, just like their prophet Zoroaster, did not need to transfer their religion *via* the written word but only *via* the spoken one. The spoken word seemed for them to be more natural and neutral, whereas the Muslims, esteeming oral poetry, based their religion on a holy, revealed and written word – the *Quran*. We can assume that after the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran in the 7th AD two types of cultures: a passing oral and incoming written (or better: oral-written), overlapped each other. Huyes claims that after Islam arrived to Iran, the taste and expectations of the audience changed. The people prefer to read poetry rather than to hear it.[17]

Of course, this kind of thinking can be understood as deceptive simplification. Orality played and still plays a significant role also among the Muslims. A typical example of this phenomenon is the tradition of learning the *Quran* and the *hadith*s by heart.[18] We should remember also, that it was not the first time the Iranians had faced a culture that estimated the written word more than they used to do. I think here about the Indian civilization and its entertainment literature represented by the *Pañcatantra* and its lost Middle Persian translation – the *Kalīlag ud Dimnag*, prepared by a Sasanian medic Borzoē (4th AD) who showed his compatriots that the script might be applied not only for any practical use but also for an "unpractical" (like any entertainment).[19]

I suppose that the aforementioned problem of the Zoroastrians as *ahl al-kitāb* was not only of a theological nature but it also must have been related to two questions that have never been openly and consciously named by Muslim scholars in their works, viz.: What is the nature of the text? and: What is the proper form of the text – written or spoken? This kind of question must have been raised once among Muslim linguists (or even if the questions never came out, they were subconsciously considered), who were interested in the problem of the origin and nature of language understood e.g. by ^cAbū-Fat<u>h</u> ^cibn Ǧinnī as:

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[16] Smurzyński 2006: 129–137.

[17] Huyse 2008: 149.

[18] About the *Quran* and Arabic literature see: Holmberg 2007: 147–161.

[19] Borzoē traveled to India in search of some medical plants but returned to Iran instead with a manuscript. Of course, a manuscript of the *Kalīlag ud Dimnag* was not a translation of any manuscript of the *Pañcatantra* but a compilation of different Indian fables extracted from the *Pañcatantra* and the *Mahābhārata* transmitted orally and in writing by the Indians. Cf. Tehranchian 1985: 8; Monši 1370hš: viii–xx.

(...) sounds with which each nation expressed its intentions.[20]

He also emphasized its phonetic side. This strong conception of a text as something existing only thanks to oral realization is still alive in the Iranian world, of which a good example is the Pashto expression *kitāb wayəl* 'to speak a book', which simply means 'to read a book'. This Pashto attitude toward the text is related to the problem of a high illiteracy rate in Afghanistan but is shows us also that the text does not always have to be understood as a product of writing but it can be also transferred *sine be sine* 'from chest to chest', as a product of word-of-mouth and memory-oriented artistic activity.

Neither Boyce, nor de Menasce, nor Smurzyński studied this topic in depth using some of the theoretical instruments developed by Ong. All of them stressed the oral character of the text and the fact that the process of evolution from an oral (*uzwānīg*) to a written (*nibēsišnīg*) form of the text started just before the Arab-Muslim conquest, and was triggered off by some Middle Persian translations of artistic Indian masterpieces as the *Pañcatantra* (that must have existed as an oral as well as a written text at that time).

In the Iranian (but not only) world, from the very beginning, only the memory was the main means of storing texts. An echo of such a phenomenon appears in a long tradition of *naqqâli* – public narration, and *šâhnâmexâni* – public presentation of stories extracted from the Iranian national epic composed by Ferdousi in the 10th century. Traveling from town to town, *šâhnâmexân* 'someone who recites the *Šâhnâme*' – folk poets, remembering and singing long parts of the text, used to keep the audience amused, provide entertainment and enjoyment. This tradition seems to be quite strong even today because in modern Iran many Iranians are able to recite whole poems from memory, a skill hardly found today in the Western world.

On the other hand, about one thousand pieces of Middle Persian papyri and parchments dated from 619–629 A.D. which were found in Egypt are examples of writing exercises and testify to quite a high culture of *dabīr*s – scribes,[21] whose profession was always lauded and highly appraised and appreciated:

> *u-š framūd kū āwarēd dābīr ī dānāg ī frazānag. u-šān āwurd dabīr ī frahixtag ī frazānag ud pēš nišast. ud harw čē wīrāz guft drust rōšn ud gōwizār nibišt. u-š ēdōn framūd nibištan kū* (...).[22]

> He ordered: 'Bring a wise and intelligent scribe.' They brought a trained and intelligent writer, and he sat in front <of him> and wrote everything that was said by Wirāz, correctly, clearly and explicitly. Thus he ordered him to write (…).[23]

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[20] Czapkiewicz 1988, no. 909, p. 43.
[21] Weber 2010, vol. 19 [*Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies*]: 255–263.
[22] *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* 3.22–4.1.
[23] Vahman 1986: 194.

Manuals like *Nāmag-nibēsišnīh* prove that scribes were carefully educated on how to compose a proper letter. And dictionaries like *Frahang ī oīm-ēwag* or *Frahang ī pahlawīg* show that there was a lot of work for *dabīr*s. Of course, writing had been known to the Iranians for centuries. The first cuneiform inscriptions were made by order of the Achæmenid kings in the 6th century BC. This practical purpose of writing discernible at that time in royal proclamations was preserved later and caused that script was used only for some official chronicles, state and private business:

> Broadly speaking, however, works of entertainment were not committed to writing in Sasanian Persia. Writing, though known for centuries, was reserved for practical purposes (such as letters, state and legal documents, and chronicles), or for dignity of religious or scholarly works.[24]

The very first examples of Middle Persian writings comprise royal inscriptions and some *ostraca* found near Nisa in today's Turkmenistan – these are the documents from local vineyards. Interestingly, writing was not used for religious and/or imaginative works until the early centuries of the Christian era. One of the first European scholars who started a discussion about the transmission of Zoroastrian religious thought was Harold Walter Bailey.[25] He accurately noticed that just before the Arab-Muslim conquest the Zoroastrians realized that the Jews, Christians, and later also Muslims, have their own "ancient and authentic body of writings of divine authority"[26], whereas so far their religious thought existed mostly as a purely oral transmission.[27] Thus, the process of writing down religious works started quite late, even if according to some never proven information the first manuscripts of the *Avesta* appeared before the collapse of the Achæmenid dynasty in the 4th century BC and were burnt by Alexander the Great, or, its missing version was allegedly prepared under the Arsacid dynasty (3rd cent. BC – 3rd cent. AD). The form and shape of the *Avesta* clearly show us the practical conception of writing. The *Avesta* is not a homogenous book but a kind of assorted mixture of oral texts collected and arranged according to liturgical use only:

> It is an assorted mixture, whose layers are so numerous and intertwined that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern its structure and trace its history.[28]

In passing, I should add that as we can read in the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, a priest Wīrāz and his seven sister-wives took pride in the fact that they knew all the *Avesta* and its comments – *Zand*, by heart. Boyce[29] explained that the tradition of memorization of the

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[24] Boyce 1968a: 2.
[25] Bailey 1943: 149–176.
[26] Bailey 1943: 151.
[27] Widengren 2008: 572–577.
[28] Kellens 2000: 1.
[29] Boyce 1968a: 35.

Avesta and *Zand* was common among the Zoroastrian priests who were obliged to learn holy texts by heart. A confirmation of this statement can be found in the *Acts of martyrs*:

> Mihrāmgušnasp wurde von früh auf in die persische Literatur und in die Magierreligion eingeweiht, sodass er schon als siebenjährige Knabe Jašt hersagen und Barsoms halten konnte.[30]

According to Geo Widengren this passage proves that education in Zoroastrian Iran involved *inter alia* learning by heart some written religious texts,[31] but as Stig Wikander has shown, the problem of orality and literacy at that time is more complicated than we think. He rightly supposed that the Zoroastrian canon of the religious texts evolved from two traditions: oral transmission of the clergymen from Staxr, and written transmission of the clergymen from Šīz.[32] A similar statement was made by Walter Belardi who studied that issue while analyzing the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*.[33]

An analysis based on several features of oral transmission distinguished by Ong shows that many Middle Persian texts, for example *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* or *Mīnōg ī xrad* are additive rather than subordinate:

> Oral structure often looks to pragmatics (...). Chirographic structures look more to syntactics. Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar.[34]

According to Ong,[35] orality places the text in its own full existential context, or, in other words, the existential context surrounds oral discourse. This is, according to Ong, the main cause for the oral pragmatics – the teller's convenience. This situation can also help the text to be determined independently of grammar. And that is just what distinguishes orality and literacy which, thanks to the script, focuses more on the syntax (and grammar).

It seems, that this Middle Persian pragmatism comes to light in a full existential context, which, as it was already mentioned, helps the teller to organize his telling. On a linguistic level, its oral pragmatism appears for example in the use of the conjunction *ud* 'and' and a frequent repetition of *hēnd*-past verbal forms (a), or repetition of two

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[30] Hoffmann 1880: 94.
[31] Widengren 2008: 574–575.
[32] Wikander 1946: 141ff.
[33] Belardi 1979: 98–99.
[34] Ong 1988: 38.
[35] Ong 1988: 38.

verbs: *zāyēd* 'she gives birth' and *zāyēnd* 'they give birth' (b), like in two passages quoted below:

a.
ud ōy wīrāz rāy haft xwāh būd ud awēšān har<w> haft xwahān wīrāz čiyōn zan būd hēnd u-šān dēn warm ud yašt kard ēstād ud ka-šān āšnūd ēg-išān ōwōn garāndom mad hēnd ud drāyīd hēnd ud wāng kard hēnd ud andar hanǧaman ī māzdēsnān pēš šud hēnd bē ēstād hēnd ud namāz burd hēnd ud gōwēnd kū ma kunēd ašmā māzdēsnān ēn tis.[36]

This Wirāz had seven sisters, and each of these seven sisters was like a wife for Wirāz. They had memorized the scriptures and performed the prayers, and when they heard <the news> they arrived in such grievous <state> and wept and shouted and went forth into the assembly of the Mazdeans, stood up, prostrated <themselves before them>, and said: 'Do not do this thing'[37];

b.
čē pīl pad sē sāl zāyēd ud asp ud uštar ud xar pad dwāzdah māh zāyēnd ud gāw ud zan pad nō māh zāyēnd ud gōspand pad panǧ māh zāyēnd ud sag ud xūg pad čahār māh zāyēnd ud gurbag pad čehel rōz zāyēd.[38]

Nun, der Elefant gebärt nach drei Jahren, und das Pferd, das Kamel und der Esel gebären nach zwölf Monaten, und die Kuh und das Weib gebären nach neun Monaten, und die Schafe gebären nach fünf Monaten, und der Hund und das Schwein gebären nach vier Monaten, und die Katze gebärt nach 40 Tagen.[39]

These simple oral-literary tricks strengthen the pragmatism of both extracts. If these two passages had been composed by a person belonging to a culture of script, or by a contemporary writer, they would have been organized according to different rules of syntax and grammar within the frameworks of the same language. The difference stems from two different means of storing the text – a person's memory or a sheet of paper. An English or Polish translation would need a different conjunction to provide a flow of narration with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing. For us, this kind of narration seems to be more archaic, whereas representatives of oral cultures do not regard it as archaic or quaint. What is more, they feel it as natural and neutral. We have no reason to suppose that for Middle Persian speakers this kind of narration was anything but kind of expression. This repetition of the conjunction, which we may find too heavy, strong and intensive and irritating, as well as an accumulation of different

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[36] *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* 2.1–2.
[37] Vahman 1986: 192.
[38] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.51.
[39] Weinreich 1992: 60.

verbal forms, nouns next to each other, or even boringly similar phrases, seem to be one of the reasons for the stylistic weakness and unattractiveness of Middle Persian literature, but this is our-readers' point of view. And of course, every reader has his own definition of an "unattractive", in this case, Middle Persian text. Some do not mind the repetitions etc. which point at connections to oral literature, but rather a clumsy style (long sentences, heavy neologisms, intricate syntax) of parts of e.g. the *Dēnkard* and the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, both examples of written literature. But still, I suggest that the stylistic weakness and unattractiveness is strengthened by the fact that Middle Persian writings are more aggregative rather than analytic.

Being aggregative is closely related to some manner of implementation of a text into memory. As Ong explained that words do not exist separately but as different kinds of clusters:

> This characteristic is closely tied to reliance on formulas to implement memory. The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight.[40]

That is why in the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, Alexander the Great – the main reason of misery and misfortune of Zoroastrian Iran, condemned also in other Middle Persian writings, was repeatedly called as *petyārag* 'evil, misfortune', *wadbaxt* 'unfortunate', *ahlomōγ* 'heretic', *druwand* 'evil, sinful, unrighteous', *anāgkardār* 'evil-doer, maleficent', or *gizistag* 'accursed, hateful':

> *ud pas gizistag gannāg mēnōg ī druwand gumān kardan ī mardōmān pad ēn dēn rāy ān gizistag aleksandar ī hrōmāyīg ī muzrāyīg-mānišn wiyābānēnīd ī pad garān sēzd ud nibard ud yask ō ērānšahr āmad.*[41]

> Then the accursed Evil Spirit, the sinful, in order to make men doubtful of this religion, misled the accursed Alexander the Roman, resident of Egypt, and sent him to the land of Iran with great brutality and violence and fear;[42]

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[40] Ong 1988: 38.
[41] *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* 1.3.
[42] Vahman 1986: 191.

ud ōy petyārag ī wadbaxt ī ahlomōγ ī druwand ī anāgkardār Aleksandar ī hrōmāyīg ī muzrāyīg-māniš̌n abar āwurd ud be sōxt.[43]

That wicked, wretched, heretic, sinful, maleficent Alexander the Roman, resident of Egypt, took away and burnt [those scriptures, namely all the Avesta].[44]

Some other examples are – *hrōmāyīg ī muzrāyīg-māniš̌n* 'staying/dwelling in Egypt', Ohrmazd was quite often called *xwāday* 'god' or *dādār* 'creator', Srōš – *ahlaw* 'righteous', Ādur – *yazd* 'god, divinity', and finally Wīrāz – *ardā* 'righteous, truthful'; this epithet clung to Wīrāz so strongly that it was later understood as his name. All these epithets recur in the descriptions of Alexander the Great, Ohrmazd, Srōš, Ādur and Wīrāz in the whole text.

This aggregativeness appears also in the *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān*, when pious Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān 'the Youngest of the Fr(i)yān family' answers his enemy's riddles, by always beginning with the same insult:

yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagān pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft.[45]

Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle![46]

An anonymous story-teller accumulated a few verbs or nouns which together form clusters that would be hard to accept by the reader:

u-š ān may ud mang be xward ud ōšyārīhā wāz be guft ud pad wistarag xuft awēšān dēndastwarān ud haft xwahān haft rōz šabān pad ātaxš ī hamēšagsōz ud bōywizārag nērang ī dēnīg ud abestāg ud zand be guft ud nask yašt ud gāhān srūd ud pad tārīgīh pās dāšt hēnd.[47]

He drank the wine and henbane, and while still conscious left bāĵ and slept on the bed. Those religious leaders and the seven sisters, for seven days and nights, at the ever-burning, smell-scattering Fire, recited the religious nērang <formulas> of the Avesta and Zand, recited the Nasks and chanted the Gāthās and kept watch in the dark.[48]

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[43] *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* 1.8.
[44] Vahman 1986: 191.
[45] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.3.
[46] Weinreich 1992: 53.
[47] *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* 2.16–17.
[48] Vahman 1986: 193.

The teller could not (and would not) analyze the structure of these epithets or sentences because all previous generations of tellers had put a lot of work into memorizing them, so any kind of analysis, which means breaking the strong invisible relations between Ohrmazd and *xwāday*, Srōš and *ahlaw*, Wīrāz and *ardā*, seems to be a very dangerous attempt, if not a horrible and fatal mistake. It does not mean that there were no other epithets to describe a specific person; there were, but there were also some basic epithets which could be always used. This is also one of the reasons why the visible repetition or redundancy is so strong in Middle Persian literature; we should not forget that repetition, together with a rhyme, alliteration, rhythm etc. keep an oral text alive.

As Ong stated, writing creates in the text a kind of imaginary line outside the mind. Even if the reader is distracted or confused and after a few pages realizes that he does not remember what he has already read, he can easily follow this line immersed in a written text, going a few pages back. But, this convenience is not within the listener's reach.

> Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. Backlooping can be entirely occasional, purely *ad hoc*. The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track.[49]

The best and the simplest way to avoid the problem of distraction is to compose a whole text on a firm skeleton of repetition. Almost every Middle Persian work was built according to this scheme, often resembling questions-and-answers, which are frequently popular in oral literature all over the world, including e.g. riddles and proverbs. Questions, riddles and proverbs engage the listener, make him confront his current knowledge with some new information, and help him to increase it, but not to study it. A typical example are the following passages taken from such texts as the *Mēnōg ī xrad* and the *Mādigān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān*:

> *naxust frašn axt ī ğādūg az yōšt ī fryān ēn pursīd kū wahišt pad gētīg weh ayāb ān ī pad mēnōg | yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagān pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft če wahišt ī pad gētīg weh kū ān ī pad mēnōg.*[50]

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[49] Ong 1988: 39.

[50] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.1–4.

Als erste Rätselfrage gab der Zauberer Axt Jōišt ī Friyān diese auf: „[Ist] das Paradies in der stofflichen Daseinsart besser, oder das in der geistigen?". Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle! Nun, das Paradies in der stofflichen Daseinsart [ist] besser als das in der geistigen.“[51]

dōyom frašn ēn pursīd kū če ān čīš az dām ī ōhrmazd kē pad kūn nišīnēd bulandtar kū pad pāy ēstēd | yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagān pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft čē ān sag ast.[52]

Als zweite Rätselfrage gab der Zauberer Axt Jōišt ī Friyān diese auf: „Was [ist] das für ein Ding aus des Schöpfung Ohrmazd's, das auf dem Hintern höher sitzt als [es] auf den Beinen steht?" | Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle! Nun, das ist der Hund.“[53]

sēyom frašn ēn pursīd kū če ān čīš az dām ī ōhrmazd kē rawēd ud gām nē nihēd | yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagān pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft čē ān winǰišk ast kē rawēd ud gām nē nihēd.[54]

Als dritte Rätselfrage gab der Zauberer Axt Jōišt ī Friyān diese auf: „Was [ist] das für ein Ding aus des Schöpfung Ohrmazd's, das geht, aber keine Schritte macht?" | Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle! Nun, das ist der Sperling, der geht, aber keine Schritte macht.“[55]

čahārom frašn ēn pursīd kū če ān čīš az dām ī ōhrmazd kē dandān srūwēn ud srū gōštēn | yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagān pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft čē ān xrōs xwānēnd murwag ī srōš-ahlaw ud ka wāng kunēd ā-š peytārag az dām ī ōhrmazd abāz dārēd.[56]

Als vierte Rätselfrage gab der Zauberer Axt Jōišt ī Friyān diese auf: „Was [ist] das für ein Ding aus des Schöpfung Ohrmazd's, dessen Zahn hornig und [dessen] Horn fleischig [ist]?" | Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle! Nun, jenes nennt man den Hahn.

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[51] Weinreich 1992: 53.
[52] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.17–19.
[53] Weinreich 1992: 53.
[54] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.20–22.
[55] Weinreich 1992: 57.
[56] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.23–26.

[Es ist] der Vogel der wahrhaftigen Srōš. Wenn [der Hahn] kräht, härt [er] die der Seele [drohende] Widerwwärtigkeit von der Schöpfung Ohrmazd's fern."[57]

As we can see, these four passages following each other were composed according to an extremely "boring" and "unattractive" pattern of repetition. Nevertheless, even the riddles of Axt are interrupted by short entertaining stories like the episode when Axt's brother, Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān's sister, and Nerosang appear. The strength of tradition, however, seems to be (more) important (than any innovation), and makes the text not to allow the teller to depart from and ignore patterns which have been developed by the previous generations. If he did depart from these patterns and composed his own text freely, he could confuse the listener who was accustomed to a well-known form. But, does it mean that an author of the *Mādigān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* simply put into writing an oral story which he heard from somebody else? The problem is of more complicated nature. The *Mādigān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* is a product of conscious work of an author or a scribe who used oral material, created his own story, and then, I assume, presented to the public, like the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* which was read to the public as well.

Even the main part of the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* was composed as a brief exchange of questions and answers, which made the text boring, stylistically weak and unattractive while reading. This schematic and conventional structure of the *Mādigān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* and the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* was enriched by schematic and conventional words, epithets and whole sentences. They establish any intra-textual relations between different parts of the text, and also a rhythm that helps any story-teller to follow the main thought and any story-listener to catch it easily. They all substitute that mental line existing in a written text with its oral equivalent, or better, changing the perspective; I would say that these oral patterns evolved into those mental lines incorporated into any written text.

But, let's go back to the aforementioned insult of Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān to his enemy – Axt, the sorcerer:

> yōšt ī fryān guft kū zīwandagn pad škōh bāš mar ī druwand ī sāstār ud murdagān ō dušox ōft.[58]

> Jōišt ī Friyān sprach: „Lebendig sei in Not, Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann [und] tot fahr zur Hölle!"[59]

Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān's insult is also a typical example of another feature of oral output – its antagonistic tone.[60] Orality, being deeper enmeshed in everyday life, tighter linked to its problems and threats, appears in the text in different forms, e.g. riddles or proverbs. An everyday struggle transferred from the real world into a literary one changes into a "mental

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[57] Weinreich 1992: 57.
[58] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 2.3ff.
[59] Weinreich 1992: 53.
[60] Ong 1988: 43–44.

combat" necessary to solve these riddles or understand these proverbs. But it also goes deeper than that. By solving such puzzles orality engages the listener to listen carefully.

That is the reason why Alexander the Great was called *petyārag*, *wadbaxt*, *ahlomōγ*, *druwand*, *anāgkardār* and *gizistag* at the same time, whereas only one or two invectives would be enough. Too much insults make the whole sentence heavy and "difficult to digest" by the reader but not by the listener. In the case of Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān, who, fighting with Axt – Ahreman's adherent, condemns him not only by answering his riddles but also by calling him *mar ī druwand ī sāstār* 'Schuft und trügerischer Tyrann' ['a villain and treacherous tyrant'], such strong insults, which are frequently repeated, seem to be pompous, amusingly affected or insincere, while for the listener they are not only natural, but even compulsory. *Petyārag*, *wadbaxt*, *ahlomōγ*, *druwand*, *anāgkardār*, *gizistag* and *mar ī druwand ī sāstār* belong to the polarized and antagonistic oral world of the struggle between good and evil, virtues and shortcomings, the hero and the rascal. Surprisingly, this strong polarization could have been emphasized by the strong ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism.

This struggle appears also at the end of the *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* added by a scribe where we find that when someone reads this text, it is as if he had prayed for three years:

> *ēn mādīgān kē paywandēd bowandagīhā bē xwānēd ud pad sar „yāahuvairyō"* *ē bē gōwēd. pad ruwān ī ōy kirbag ēdōn bawēd čīyōn mār-ē pad nērang ī abestāg* *be ōzanēd. any pad ruwān ī ōy ēdōn bawēd čiyōn ka sē sāl yašt ī āb srūd ē gāhān* *yazēd. ud* būd dastwar kē guft kū any sāl ē *wināh ī ayazišnīh ō bun nē bawēd*.[61]

> Wer diese Geschichte [zu anderen Geschichten] hinzufügt, und [sie] Vollständig liest und einen Yaθā=ahū=vairiiō bis zu Ende spricht, für dessen Seele wird das so [ein förderndes Werk], als ob [er] drei Jahr lang den Yašt aus den gesungenen Gathas rezitiert. Ein Priester war, der sagte: [Durch das Sprechen] des Ahun kommt ein Jahr des schädigenden Werkes der Nichtteilnahme am Gottesdienst nicht zum Angehäuften.[62]

An anonymous author was trying to attract the listener's/reader's attention, and the text was made to absorb him. This is the question of any possible teller's and listener's identification with the hero.[63] All these things occur because of the fact that oral "literature" is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced.

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[61] *Mādīgān ī Yōšt ī Fr(i)yān* 5.1–6.

[62] Weinreich 1992: 83.

[63] A similar pattern was used in the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag*, when Ohrmaz turns to Wīrāz with his religious recommendations, in fact, he turns to the listener to give him some useful religious instructions. It means that the listener becomes the main hero of the text he listens to.

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known, 'getting with it'. Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. The 'objectivity' which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual's reaction is not expressed as simply individual or 'subjective' but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal 'soul'.[64]

In Iran orality played a significant role from the very beginning and only later was partly replaced by literacy which has caused that only a written text (usually based on one or a few oral versions[65]) is understood as a final (and proper) form of the *œuvre*:[66]

L'épopée romatique de Gorgāni, écrite au début de la période seldjoukide (en 447/1054 d'après Minorsky) sur l'ordre d'Amin Abolfath Mozaffar Nišāpuri, gouverneur seljoukide d'Ispahan, était **le produit final** [emphasis mine – MK] d'une transmission écrite qui fut probavlement longtemps oral.[67]

In the case of New Persian literature, a best example of such a situation is Ferdousi's *Šâhnâme* containing some older compositions,[68] while in the case of Avestan tradition – the *Avesta*, whose archetype is still the object of scholars' interest.[69] This sort of all-embracing literacy does not allow us to amend the text, because any change, understood as a kind of damage and violence done to the text, is unacceptable:

It may be supposed that the differences of versions are due to an oral tradition. That is to say that since some of the religious men, believers and followers have learned these texts by heart, then while retelling (transferring) the account to the next generation, or while writing and re-writing it, these differences in Parsig, Pazand and Zoroastrian Persian versions have come into being due to **carelessness** [emphasis mine – MK], something which is very common in oral tradition (...),[70]

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[64] Ong 1988: 45–46.

[65] Akbarzâde 1379hš: 18ff.

[66] An *œuvre* whose contents is the result of a complex process of mixing both oral and written records. This is also one of the reasons why some modern philological tools are impractical in the case of Middle Persian texts: "(...) bisogna anche tener conto del fatto che i criteri elaborati dalla filologia in tempi moderni per la ricostruzion di testi classici o romanzi non sono automaticamente adottabili dalla filologia pahlavica, a causa dei problemi specifici che i testi pahlavici presentano" (Ciancaglini 1994: 49).

[67] Krasnowolska 2012: 147.

[68] Akbarzâde 1379hš: 18ff.

[69] Kellens 2000: 31–34.

[70] Kargar 2009: 193.

while orality lets the story-teller play with the plot. As it has been proven by Milman Parry or Ong,[71] oral poets and composers do not want to learn all the text by heart, but having a very wide vocabulary can decorate the same thought with different attributes depending on a situation.

The general conclusion that we can draw is that since Middle Persian literature had a strongly oral character and its orality influenced its literary form and subject matter of written down manuscripts, orality made all the written texts only a sort of "crib" for the teller who adapted the story to his audience. Once again, Ong's book provides us with a useful confirmation:

> Moreover, besides transcription of oral performances such as orations, writing eventually produced strictly written compositions, designed for assimilation directly from the written surface. Such written compositions enforced attention to texts even more, for truly written compositions came into being as texts only, even though many of them were commonly listened to rather than silently read, from Livy's histories to Dante's *Commedia* and beyond.[72]

But, once again, we can see that the problem or orality (and literacy) is of more complicated nature, and it is impossible to demarcate the border between these two forms of literature. Ong's claimed that Dante's *La Divina Commedia* was rather listened to than read, while Huyse suggests that although Middle Persian poetry was rather listened to than read, New Persian one conversely, rather read than listened to. One may ask: Who is right? But this question remains without any explicit reply.

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[71] Ong 1988: 20–27.
[72] Ong 1988: 9–10.

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