

Introduction

The term ‘transitional text’ first came into somewhat notorious prominence when – in his seminal 1960 study, *The Singer of Tales* – one of the founding fathers of Oral-Formulaic theory, Milman Parry’s protégé, Albert Lord, categorically rejected the idea of their very existence:

It is worthy of emphasis that the question we have asked ourselves is whether there can be such a thing as a transitional *text*; not a *period* of transition between oral and written style, or between illiteracy and literacy, but a *text*, product of the creative brain of a single individual... I believe that the answer must be in the negative, because the two techniques are, I submit, contradictory and mutually exclusive. Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained. The written technique, on the other hand, is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly combine, to form another, a third, a ‘transitional’ technique... The two by their very nature are mutually exclusive. We may in actuality discover what might be called special categories of texts, but it is more than doubtful that they should be labeled ‘transitional’, that is, part way between oral and written techniques. (129)

This disparaging estimation ultimately resulted in the death knell of the term ‘transitional’ for use to describe texts being produced by individuals who mirrored their societies in making the transition from oral ways of thinking to literate ones – killing the vigour of a proposition that Lord himself acknowledged was gaining ground at the time amongst Diplomatic Homerists and specialists of Old and Middle English – resulting in the label becoming merely a byword to describe texts that proved useful for demonstrating oral origins of written productions. Even in this special case, however, Lord emphatically insisted that: ‘They are *not* “transitional”, but are in a class by themselves’ (128), emphasizing that ‘in the last analysis a poem is either of the oral tradition or it is not’ (129n9).

Although scholars continued to refer to texts that seemed to indicate a continuum between oral modes and written ones as ‘transitional’ – most notably classicists and medievalists – it was more often than not with Lord’s admonition firmly in mind that they cautiously refrained from overtly asserting that there was any blending or combination of the techniques of oral and literate composition in any given work. Instead, they were more likely to propose that a written text had been composed chirographically, in the literate mode, adopting elements and ornamentations from the oral mode that were still familiar via popular works that must still have been circulating, but which had been produced when their society was still measurably unaffected by literacy. Walter Ong alluded to the patching together of oral scraps in an otherwise literate piece when he noted that: ‘oral discourse has commonly been thought of even in oral milieus as weaving or stitching: *rhaps idein*, to “rhapsodize”, basically means in Greek “to stitch songs together”’ (13). He astutely justified his sewing analogy by further noting that: “‘Text’, from a root meaning “to weave”, is, in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is “literature”, which refers to letters etymologically (*litterae*) of the alphabet’ (13). In addition to providing him with the leeway necessary to justify the apparently oxymoronic term ‘oral literature’, his argument also allowed him to reiterate the very concept of ‘text’ that Lord had initially used in declaring that it could be either oral or written; but by emphasizing that the traces of oral discourse found in such written texts had only been patched into it, Ong implicitly rejected the idea that the result was in any way an organically unified representation of actual transitional literature. Indeed, even in the very title of his culminating 1982 work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong was careful not to call into question the polarity established so definitively by Lord twenty years previously between the lettered and unlettered modes of thought and expression. In fact, although Ong uses ‘oral’ or ‘orality’ 1097 times, ‘literacy’ or ‘literate’ 395 times, he only uses the word ‘transition’ once in his text, noting that ‘the transition from orality to literacy was slow’ (112), and studiously avoids making reference to ‘transitional’ or ‘transitionality’ altogether.

In many respects, *Orality and Literacy* was the ultimate climax of the intervening decades of scholarship dedicated to the place of orality in literature, or the oral components of written texts. The diverse ways in which the dichotomy between orality and literacy had been realized in such various cultures from so many different periods had required a host of specialists from

countless fields to tailor their own definitions of Lord's terms – notably that of the formula, but also the very concept of literacy and orality, as well as the idea of transitionality – in order to make them fit the nature of any given body of literature they had under study. Terms were continuously adapted and elaborated to meet the special needs or conditions of scholarship required for the study of any given text or corpus, until eventually the numerous variations became so innumerable that they resulted in cumbersome nebulosity rather than clarification. This, in turn, naturally led to a general decline of interest in the subject as continued intervention inevitably seemed to muddy the waters and divide them rather than distil them into a clear and unified stream of thought. Throughout its late-twentieth-century heyday of popularity, however, the binary dichotomy between orality and literacy in those texts that seemed to contain characteristics of both was almost invariably maintained, with the idea of 'transitionality' being limited to reflections of oral rhapsodes in literary texts. If anyone ever thought it, no one ever dared to call into question the received wisdom that a single individual could not 'think now in one way and now in another', or even think 'in a manner that is a combination of two techniques', so that there is nothing 'part way between oral and written' (Lord 129).

Specialists of literacy now know that this premise is entirely false. Indeed, in *Literacy for All* – publication 89 of UNESCO's Institute for Educational Planning's Fundamentals of Educational series – Agneta Lind specifically laments that, until quite recently and sometimes even today, 'The dichotomy between literate and illiterate implied in many surveys trying to measure literacy rates [...] is unfortunate, since learning, mastering and using literacy are context-sensitive, relative, and comprise a *continuum* of communication' (30, emphasis added). The recognition that 'literacy skills are a continuum and develop throughout life' (83) is a fundamental refutation of Lord's premise that there is invariably a dichotomic opposition between literacy and orality, and that it would be impossible for 'a single individual who in composing an epic would think now in one way and now in another, or, perhaps, in a manner that is a combination of two techniques' (129). Lord's conclusion that 'it is conceivable that a man might be an oral poet in his younger years and a written poet later in life, but it is not possible that he be *both* an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career' (129), is therefore based on the fatally flawed misconception that orality can only be paired with literacy in a purely binary construct with a vacuum between them, as opposed to being terminal points joined along the axis of a continuum which lengthens as one learns.

Lord's fallacious logic furthermore overlooks the fact that learning to read and write is not an instantaneous transformation that is accomplished as quickly and completely as, say, losing one's virginity, with a defining watershed moment that discretely demarcates a period of ignorant pre-coital 'before' from that of a fully initiated post-coital 'after'. Indeed, in this respect Lind observes that, insofar as being initiated into the mysteries of the written word is concerned, 'the term "post-literacy" is misleading in that it disguises the fact that literacy is a continuum' (47), and the skills acquired in attaining literacy 'develop throughout life in literate environments, but without literate environments and useful application, they stagnate and are easily lost' (83). In adults especially, it would therefore be expected that – contrary to what Lord professed – an extended period of overlap would exist in which the individual did indeed rely on both oral and written techniques, that the two are not invariably mutually exclusive, and that they could indeed combine, under certain circumstances, to form a very special third 'transitional' technique that is part-way between the oral and written. It would also seem that, in certain cultural environments, a single individual's reliance upon acquired literacy might fluctuate, not only due to the individual's waxing or waning mastery of the written word as its use was picked up or neglected, but also due to the social acceptance of works being produced that were marked by notably oral or literacy-derived characteristics, which would seemingly affect the degree to which the compositor would wish to take up and hone the skills of literacy in the first place.

Furthermore, Lord's argument that, 'Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained' (129), is also demonstrably specious. Presumably anyone who acquired literacy after the early stages of childhood, and perhaps especially poets, would at least be able to recall the oral modes of thought upon which they had not only once been reliant, but which they had even successfully manipulated in composing verse orally; any such individual would conceivably therefore still be both capable of, and, presumably, tempted to exploit such methods, even when composing with pen in hand. Even those who acquire reading early are not entirely incapable of using orality to some extent, as evidenced by numerous professions in which dialectics are essential, such as lawyers, who, until very recently, when computer technology ultimately rendered everyone keyboard savvy, often resorted to dictation – complete with notation of punctuation and paragraphs – in order to set down the flow of their thoughts rapidly through a dictation which only achieved its written form after being typed up by a secretary. Such learned professionals would un-

deniably be literate, characteristically from such an early age that literacy may indeed have already restructured their thought processes to the extent that they had a dependence on writing, as postulated by Ong, in order to retain and organize information mentally; but that dependence did not entirely efface their ability to spontaneously produce orally an essentially written discourse. These documents, too, might be considered transitional texts of a different sort, those in which, one might argue, it is orality rather than literacy that had been acquired; if such an apparent ‘regression’ is possible with prose texts – which Ong notes are particularly characteristic of the literate mind – how much more effective such retrogression must prove with verse text, the natural structural framework upon which, he asserts, oral thought is stretched.

It is therefore the purpose of this special issue to re-examine and revitalize the concept not only of *transitional texts* – in the sense of texts that show both oral and literate approaches to composition being simultaneously employed in the same piece by the same compositor – but also that of *transitional literature* itself, a rich yet neglected field, which largely remains *terra incognita* today for having been so early mislabelled as *terra nullius* by vanguard specialists mapping the terrain. This collection, whose importance and transcendence stems from its having brought together complementary contributions examining what could properly be labelled transitional texts from widely disparate cultures, ages and origins, seeks to redress the balance.

It begins with a lively introduction to the concept of transitional texts across the world and throughout the ages by Ruth Finnegan, who emphasizes the theoretical implications of the topic, before delving into the three contributions of the collection’s first section, ‘Medieval Europe’, dealing with what is traditionally the most familiar borderlands of this *terra periculosa*, medieval European literature. John Ford’s examination of the ways in which the Matter of England cycle of the Middle English verse romances – spanning the lifetime of the genre – demonstrates that, ironically, the use of apparently oral tags increases over time as the compositors’ thought processes become increasingly more adapted to literate ways of thinking. The oral component still exists in all the texts, and though they become grotesquely inflated and embellished in later romances, where they are apparently more decorative than functional, the tags and formulas typical of orality are used sparingly, succinctly and effectively in the early romances – which even refer to and esteem writing – suggesting a genuine blending of oral and literate modes of thought and composition in truly transitional texts. Ford’s work is complimented by

Alan Murray's examination of the Middle High German *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, which was undoubtedly first composed as a written text, but like the later English romances, deliberately (and, perhaps, more effectively) exploits numerous features characteristic of oral-formulaic poetry in order to appeal to a listening audience, who might have needed the oral cues and tags to follow a narrative written in a dialect or language than might not have been their own. This first section concludes with Miguel Ayerbe's informative comparative analysis of two versions of the *Lay of Hildebrand* – the ninth-century Old High German *Älteres Hildebrandslied* and the late fifteenth-century early New High German *Jüngerer Hildebrandslied* – whose very different forms demonstrate how the narrative structure changes as oral elements are sloughed off, bringing full circle the theoretical arguments postulated to explain the ways in which orality and literacy may have interacted to affect each other in medieval literature, thereby setting the groundwork for more empirical studies in the following section, examining modern instances of the old saws, which substantiate many of the claims found here in Part One.

The second part, 'The Contemporary Maghreb and South Arabia', thus segues into less theoretical examples, where the practices suggested in studies of medieval European literature are not simply reconstructed and hypothesized, but are actually observed and measured in a number of today's cultures found in some pockets of the Arab world, where conditions of literacy can arguably be claimed to resemble to some extent those which might have existed centuries before in Europe. *Hic sunt dracones*. These four contributions begin with Francisco Moscoso García's analysis of Moroccan author Elie Benchetrit's 2017 novel of historical fiction, *El mazal de los pobres* (*The Mazal of the Poor*), which is valuable for its demonstration of the author's first-hand knowledge of Hakeitia, the occidental variety of Ladino widely spoken by Maghrebi Jews until their near total disappearance from the region in the late twentieth century. Moscoso provides a thorough linguistic study of Benchetrit's portrayal of Tangier's mid-twentieth-century vernacular dialect of this language, which, unlike its western counterpart, oriental Ladino, never developed its own literary standard. It was therefore employed almost exclusively as a colloquial idiom, and any literate speakers who would wish to write it would be constrained to use orthographical conventions devised for the languages of the colonial powers, French and/or Spanish, which were the standards taught in schools. Such a state is somewhat evocative of that which Ford expects existed in the early Middle English period – when formal education in England was confined to lear-

ning to read and write Latin or French correctly, the rules of whose orthography were then frequently and unsystematically misapplied to English – but more strikingly here, it is also highly reminiscent of the diglossic situation presented in the following three companion pieces, where some prestige form of Arabic (classical, standard or even a regional national dialect) exerts an acute influence on the written form of local registers, dialects or languages.

Sam Liebhaber addresses this imbalance in his fascinating study of Ḥājj Dākōn's collection of poems entitled *The Dīrwān*, which is significant for being the first literary publication in the South Arabian (East South Semitic) language of Mahri, spoken in southeast Yemen and a portion of western Oman. Most of its speakers had never considered writing their language, and Liebhaber observed and discussed with the esteemed local poet, Ḥājj Dākōn, his blending of the oral practices he had long been used to using in composing verse in Mahri, with the simultaneous employment of written practices he had mastered from Arabic, with whose prestige Ḥājj Dākōn sought to compete in his own language, using a newly devised script derived from the standard abjad. Kogan then examines similar developments in Mahri's sister language, Soqotri, spoken and preserved on the isolated island of Soqatra in the Gulf of Aden. Here, too, a writing system based on the Arabic abjad is being devised in order to record this vibrant language with a rich oral history, which until now was almost entirely devoid of writing; a by-product of Soqotri's nascent intralingual literacy is the adaptation of traditional techniques of stylistics, rhetorical patterning and narration – particularly in certain exempla of a religious nature, long the exclusive preserve of Arabic – towards a new transitional style, that seems to borrow linguistic aspects adopted in translation from written Arabic, and incorporated into the oral telling and written development of traditional tripartite Soqotri fairy tales, leading to novel expressions in Soqotri, and resulting in a new, unambiguously transitional form of literature. Interestingly, these observations by Kogan in respect to Soqotri prose narratives complement Liebhaber's observation of similar innovations in Ḥājj Dākōn's Mahri verse, most notably in the sudden development of an unattested messenger figure, whose emergence seems to depend on innovative possibilities provided by, if not derived from, the incorporation of literate practices into traditional oral forms of discourse.

The examples of Soqotri and Mahri are especially interesting for providing examples of ways in which vibrant oral languages, which have been safely entrenched as the dominate vernacular of a region in a purely spoken form for a very long time, initially react upon receiving the means to create their own

written texts when a writing system is finally developed for them. It is true that changes are immediate, and it is interesting that they show many parallels not only with each other, but also with the hypothesized practices mentioned by Ford in respect to the earlier Middle English verse romances, and those of Ayerbe in respect to the Old High German *Älteres Hildebrandslied*. Unlike Lord's typical singers – who were undeniably skilled oral composers, aware that writing existed, but functionally if not entirely illiterate – Ford and Ayerbe's examination of practices related to medieval literature might possibly suggest the ways in which a composer of oral literature might begin to incorporate aspects of literate thought and narrative structuring while mastering literacy, using both thought processes simultaneously, especially in the early stages. Liebhaber and Kogan's examples of modern, contemporary literature from South Arabia, however, reinforce these suppositions, and are unquestionably even more compelling for providing living examples that actually do so.

The second section then concludes with Sarali Gintsburg's absorbing study of what might represent a slightly later stage in a society's development of literacy – and thus, perhaps, providing a better parallel to Ford's later Middle English verse romances, or Ayerbe's early New High German *Jüngeres Hildebrandslied* – in her intriguing examination of the oral traditions of the Moroccan Rif's Jbala community, and the work of modern Jebli poets who consider themselves to be steeped in the oral tradition, but who nevertheless make effective use of writing (with different levels of proficiency) in the actual production of their 'vernacular' verse. Like Kogan and Liebhaber, Gintsburg follows Lord not only in observing, recording and analysing her subjects' oral verse performances, but also by interviewing them, sometimes in the act of composing, and ascertaining their own impressions on the extent to which they believe literacy affects their art. Also like Liebhaber and Kogan, Gintsburg then disagrees with Lord's denial of the existence of transitional texts – and thereby transitional literature – finding elements of both the oral and literate modes of composition actively being used simultaneously by all poets in her study, and concrete markers of both styles in their verse.

Most intriguingly, however, Gintsburg also astutely recognizes that the accompanying globalization and opening of the Jbala's *Weltgeist* that comes with literacy also affects choices made by composers, struggling to maintain the authenticity of the traditional oral modes demanded by their long-established audiences, while adapting their language, material and structural organization of it in order for it likewise to appeal not only to the community's

younger generation, but also in order for it to find favour with a larger national, or pan-Arabic public. This has driven innovation reminiscent of the sudden development of the messenger observed in Mahri by Liebhaber, though in the case of the Jebli poets observed by Gintsburg, a telephonic text message takes the place of the messenger. She also notes that, in order to maintain a general appeal rather than being reduced to an abstruse rustic form typical only of an isolated locale, modern and contemporary Jebli composers are increasingly converging the form and structure of their various traditional poetic styles with that of the more prestigious and cosmopolitan *malhun*, a form of urban sung poetry that is enjoyed throughout Morocco, and recognizable throughout the Maghreb. Gintsburg posits that such developments are protective adaptations that permit traditional forms of oral poetry to retain their relevance in an ever-changing world, and thereby preserve and protect their viability, albeit in a transitional rather than purely oral form.

These observations by Gintsburg in respect to the ways oral poetry confronts literacy – adapting into a form of transitional literature in order to survive by remaining relevant to the lifeworld of its audience – then leads to the third section of the collection, ‘Contemporary Basque’, examining the ways in which a fully literate modern society might continuously preserve aspects of orality in contemporary forms of traditional literature. In their studies of modern, contemporary versifiers practicing the traditional Basque art of *bertsolaritza* – which even today is characterized by the spontaneous production of extemporaneously composed songs to meet the demands of a special occasion, and which, therefore, would require even highly literate practitioners to engage in the same sort of rapid formulaic recall and impromptu composition that Lord observed over a century ago in his completely illiterate Yugoslav singers – John Martin-Etxebeste and Asier Barandiaran provide compelling evidence of highly literate poets’ ability to recapture, to some extent, the oral mode of thinking in order to produce an acceptable *bertso* successfully. More than any of the other versifiers heretofore examined in this collection – whose proficiency with the written word is frequently questionable, especially in their first language, in which their art is composed, and most of whom could therefore generally be considered to be only functionally literate or semiliterate, categories Lord failed to consider – these *bertsolaris* are exactly the sorts of composers who exemplify Lord’s prototype of the learned poet, who should therefore be incapable of oral composition. Moreover, having mastered literacy at a young age, they are furthermore the sort of individuals whom

Ong suggests have had their consciousness irretrievably restructured by literacy, and should therefore be incapable even of oral modes of thinking.

Nevertheless, in his thorough examination of Xabier Lete's poetic works – many of which were admittedly written with pen in hand – Martin-Etxebeste finds that the poet frequently has a tendency to deliberately forgo revising his verse so as to 'correct' it, in order for it to fully instantiate the conventional demands of formal written verse, preferring instead to leave it in the unpolished form that would naturally result from spontaneous oral patterning. This is highly reminiscent of the sort of blending Gintsburg observed in Jebli verse, wherein the arrangements of any given versifier can display markers of both spontaneous (oral) composition, as well as reflected (literate) revision, with both modes sometimes appearing in a single work. Indeed, Martin-Etxebeste's empirical analysis and contrast of a number of Lete's poems – in which both metrical and lexical selections and patterning are considered – allow Martin-Etxebeste convincingly to argue that Lete was frequently capable of embracing a purely oral form of traditional Basque verse, sometimes later adapting it in a manner that clearly indicates the use of literate modes of thought, but occasionally thereafter actively disengaging his literate mind in order for his verse to 'evolve' back into a more customary oral form.

It is exactly this sort of 'learned orality' that Asier Barandiaran then addresses in his study of *berstos* produced spontaneously by practiced *bertsolaris* during the quadrennial *Euskal Herriko Bertsolari Txapelketa* (Bertsolaritza Championship of the Basque Country). The competitive nature of these performances requires exactly the same sort of rapid, coherent and fluid discourse that Lord proposed was necessary for his illiterate singers to have in order for their verse to find favour with their audiences. Moreover, like Lord's singers, these live-audience competitions mean that the performances require immediate, for-the-nonce composition, that cannot be laboriously or painstakingly planned, perfected, and memorized ahead of time. Like Lord's singers, composition and performance are therefore simultaneous, each uniquely tailored to a likewise unique situation, and must therefore engage an oral mode of thinking as it would be impossible to take the time required to generate such productions chirographically through the use of literate composition practices. Also like Lord's singers, a successful *bertsolari* – and one imagines that all eight of the *bertsolaris* who are permitted to compete for the *txapela* (trophy) every four years is already considered a master of the art – will use the intervening years to perfect his or (increasingly) her skills through fre-

quent oral performances with guest interaction at less formal gathering, acquiring useful turns of phrases and formulas from competitors, and honing their personal ability to rhapsodize them together in their own verse, exactly as Lord described his subjects having done.

Thus, although this collection presents what some might ungenerously wish to argue is a hodgepodge of offerings from unrelated fields – medieval English and German lays, chronicles and romances; modern and contemporary vernacular compositions in minority languages overshadowed by Arabic in the Maghreb and South Arabia; modern and contemporary Basque performances by highly literate citizens of France and Spain – they all share a common focus: the blending of oral and literate modes of composition in order to produce truly transitional texts. This is admittedly a somewhat daring conclusion to make, given that – ever since Lord essentially killed the infant concept in its cradle, claiming that, based on his studies of orality amongst completely illiterate composers in one specific cultural milieu in the early twentieth century – conventional wisdom has long held that such texts do not and cannot exist. Few have dared to go behind Lord's pronouncement, despite his claim being a theory rather than a proven law, and one that he himself prudently qualifies as a 'belief' that he 'submits'. It is furthermore possible that in his zeal to prove and promote orality to the Classicist naysayers who could not 'tolerate the unwashed illiterate' evidenced in the verse of Homer, Lord went somewhat overboard in denying any literate component to traditional forms of epic composition, but that does not mean they do not, or cannot exist.

What is therefore truly exciting in this collection is the overall complementarity across the board, in which each selection harmonizes with and supports the others in demonstrating that different cultures at different times – each at a different point in its own evolution from a primarily oral to a predominately literate society – share so many similarities and parallels in the way orality is maintained alongside literacy, rather than being completely replaced by it, as Lord suggested, that their concerted findings cannot be dismissed as merely coincidental. Each study and group of studies reaches, from its own unique point of view, essentially the same conclusion: such transitional texts, and indeed, transitional literature, can and do exist.

Such being the case, the arguments in favour of the existence of traditional texts as well as traditional literature are actually strengthened rather than diminished by being reached via so many different routes stemming from such a 'hodgepodge' of disciplines. Indeed, it is hoped that the very interdiscipli-

narity of this collection focusing on the common shared point of transitionality can serve as a starting point for new avenues of exploration in the future. While the central focus is narrow, it is evidently attainable from innumerable points of departure, as furthermore evidenced in José Torres's review of Margalit Finkleberg's *Homer and Early Greek Epic: Collected Essays* (2020), and Gintsburg's review of Ruth Finnegan's *Time for the World to Learn from Africa* (2018), which taken together as a pair, fittingly terminate this edition. After all, the possibility of the existence of transitional texts and transitional literature was first promulgated by the Diplomatic Homerists that Lord wished to contravene, while our own collection begins with Finnegan's overview of transitionality across the world, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands, which likewise promise to become rich sources of material alongside the examples presented here from Europe, Asia and North Africa, for innumerable future endeavours. It is furthermore expected that the Americas, too, will ultimately prove to have much to offer, not only in the preservation of traditional indigenous forms of composition yet to be examined, but also in such diverse literary phenomena as Appalachian folktales and song, preserved slave narratives, African-American spirituals, urban snapping, flyting, and especially poetry slamming, and much, much more. Thus, while orality and literacy can and often do exist as distinct concepts, it seems that they can and just as often do coexists simultaneously in transitional forms of literature – including written and performance texts – in various cultures at different levels of technological advancement throughout time and across the world.

John C. Ford
Sarali Gintsburg

Editors

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