

# “Did you say ‘oral’ literature’?” asked Walter Ong

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## Abstract

### “Did you say ‘oral literature’?” asked Walter Ong

*This article investigates whether there is a theoretical framework for the notion of oral literature that is common to both oral theory and literary theory. The notion of oral literature has, within oral theory, generally been put to an anthropological – rather than literary – use. Because of particular difficulties involved with the appreciation of the textual properties of the oral text, a modernist approach proves unsatisfactory. A solution for the theoretical difficulty of integrating oral literature into literary theory is sought via a particular post-modernist view of literature, namely Anthony Easthope's reconceptualisation of literary studies as study of signifying practice (“cultural studies”) open to both literary and popular texts. Given the exclusivity of the notion of popular culture, centred on misconceptions relating to the constructedness of the oral text, the notion of oral literature continues, however, to operate in a theoretical void.*

## 1. Making sense of Ong's denial of oral literature

Ong's question was, of course, a bit incredulous. Even though he does not do so himself, his dislike of the term “oral literature” can usefully be motivated at two levels. The first one is terminological and straightforward. “Literature” is derived from the Latin word *littera* meaning letter of the alphabet, and as such refers to something that is *written*<sup>2</sup> (Ong, 1982:11). The second level can be

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1 As referring to societies where the spoken word – unmediated by “modern” technology – is the major means, not just of communication, but of storage and transmission of knowledge (see Ong's state of “primary orality”; also Havclocck, 1963). To the extent that this notion may be problematized (see for example Street, 1986), it can no doubt be argued that it amounts to a theoretical abstraction.

2 In the sense of the visual representation of specific words (as opposed to “meaning” in a more general sense), particularly where such representation is *phonetically* based (see Ong, 1982:83-93).

termed "ideological" and is much more complex. Ong is sensitive to the arrogance of a modern scholarship that blithely understands, explains and appreciates the products of a given culture in the light of its own – limited – experience. We take the model we built in our own backyard, we extrapolate from it, generalise from it and more or less ruthlessly apply it until it becomes the model that *everybody* built in their own backyard. One such model has been constructed from our experience of reading and writing a certain kind of poem, short story and novel, and called "literature", which we expect to be adhered to and followed by all people at all times. The prime example of this kind of "cultural chauvinism" has been the scholarly treatment meted out to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. "To account for their received excellence", Ong (1982:18)<sup>3</sup> tells us, "each age (had) been inclined to interpret them as doing better what it conceived its poets to be doing or aiming at". It was not until the American classicist Milman Parry's convincing philological demonstration in the early thirties that this chauvinism was to some extent undercut. The formulaic structure of the Homeric poems pointed to them having been composed *in performance*; they were never written, merely written *down*, copied<sup>4</sup>. The Homeric poet (poets, in fact) *spoke*. If our literature had come about in the same way as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we would most certainly not have recognised it as such, let alone call it by that name. In short, the imperial model had been cut down to size. Surely our newly found humility obliged us, not only to explicitly recognise what we had ignored all along, but, moreover, to abandon the "literature" framework of that ignorance?

Ong therefore calls us to order. But he also provides us with a way out. This comes in the form of his persuasive presentation of the "psychodynamics of orality" (see Ong, 1982:31-77). Central to Ong's argument is the idea that transmission of knowledge by linguistic means exclusively depends, in an oral society, on how "memorable" speech is. The "mnemonic procedures" adopted for this purpose (of which the formulas of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* offer the definitive example) are, however, not only "part of ordinary extrapoetic verbalization *but actually determine thought structures as well*" (Ong, 1967:30. Emphasis added). Moreover, the *need* of oral societies "(to) invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages ... establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good

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3 Pierre Macherey has remarked that the *Iliad* was so different for us to what it must have been for its contemporary "reader" (audience) that "it was as if we ourselves had written it" (Macherey, 1977:45).

4 See Foley's notion of the "oral-derived text" (Foley, 1990:5). Goody (1987:78-109) has argued that the epic form of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in fact constitutes an "early literate" genre.

reason *inhibits intellectual experimentation*" (Ong, 1982:41. Emphasis added). People who have not had the benefit of the special kind of visual representation of language that writing affords, do not just think differently to us literates, but in a very real sense actually think *less*. "Orality" comes to denote a mode of cognition rather than a mode of communication. "Oral literature" is a theoretical non-starter, not because of Ong's recognition of a distinct oral art (undercutting cultural chauvinism), but because of his ultimately reductive view of the cognitive processes of oral people. In the final analysis they simply lack the intellectual means to produce anything as "creative", as "meaningful" or as "sophisticated" as literature.

"(C)oncepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever", argues Ong (1982:12). But if the term "car" can be used to refer to a wagon not pulled by an animal, I can see no reason why the term "literature" should not also refer to a text<sup>5</sup> not produced by writing. And while I wholeheartedly support the demise of a chauvinistic "literature" through which linguistic expression is held to a particular *written* model of artistic creation, the ambiguity – to say the least – of Ong's position in this regard makes me hesitate. In the face of the "psychologizing literary theory" Ong has devised (Vail & White, 1991:xi), a questioning of the notion of oral literature could all too easily lead to accusations of racism.

## 2. Asserting oral literature as a counter to Ong's "psychologizing literary theory"

To validate the notion of oral literature on the basis that oral societies possess literature "just like us" does not offer a particularly solid basis upon which to conceptualise it. Yet the notion of oral literature continues to come across as a kind of defensive buffer against the still current tendency, established within anthropology, of seeing people of different cultures in terms of a "great divide": hot vs cold, modern vs neolithic, abstract vs concrete, science vs magic etc. (see Lévi-Strauss, 1966). At precisely the time that anthropology has begun, however, to cast aside binary oppositions of this type in favour of a more relativist framework (see Vail & White, 1991:1-15), a new division comes about under the "technological"<sup>6</sup> guise of non-literate (or oral) vs literate, a division of which the "psychodynamics" described by Ong represents an eloquent elaboration. Vail

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5 "(A) real, objective and tangible score, an entity that exists both as a thing in itself and as a directive for its perceivers" (Foley, 1990:5). "Text" in this sense also means "performance".

6 Writing is a technology. For a critique of this supposedly "neutral" (i.e. non-ideological) nature of the literate vs oral dichotomy, see Street (1986:19-43).

and White (1991:xi) see the latter as bringing about a "dehumanized stereotype known as 'oral man'". It is this "oral man" that oral literature comes to dignify, this stereotype it can be regarded as seeking to refute.

Vail and White's research on "the oral poetry of south-central Africa" (1991:319) to a large degree reflects the kind of defensiveness I have associated with the notion of oral literature. Considering the poetry they come across in terms of "a common aesthetic", central to which is "the concept of poetic license" (Vail & White, 1991:319), they reject the view – prominent since Parry's conclusions as to the *necessarily*<sup>7</sup> formulaic nature of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – that the essence of the oral text can be understood "through an investigation of the mechanics of its performance". This brings them to insist that "(oral poetry) is emphatically not the expression of societies locked in cycles of intellectual repetition, incapable of change ..." (Vail & White, 1991:320). Earlier, describing their study as "dealing with individual instances of how nonliterate peoples of southern Africa ... coped with change", they claim to have been "struck with the flexibility of these societies, not their changelessness, with their openness and sense of history, not their conservatism ..." (Vail & White, 1991:xii).

In terms of debunking reductionist oppositions between "us" and "them" on the basis of literate vs oral, Ruth Finnegan's contribution has been particularly noteworthy. In an article in *Modes of Thought* (1973) she specifically addresses the significance of the notion of literature in the light of postulated differences between literate and oral cognitive processes. This she does by highlighting the literary "function" of "intellectual expression"<sup>8</sup> (Finnegan, 1973:118), which she analyses in terms of the broad categories of "self-awareness, detachment and intellectual probing" (Finnegan, 1973:114). She provides abundant verbatim evidence of the latter characteristics in oral traditions ranging from the Zulu to the Ewe, the Eskimo to the Icelandic. In addition she finds enough examples of specifically aesthetic concerns to suggest that the widely held view of oral literature as being, somehow, more "pragmatic"<sup>9</sup> than written literature, is, at the very least, grossly over-simplified. "Art for art's sake" can be as real in oral as in literate society (Finnegan, 1973:133-135). She summarises her argument as

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7 So as to favour composition in performance. For a complete overview of this conception, see Foley (1988).

8 Broadly defined as "communication of insight" (Finnegan, 1973:122).

9 "Perhaps the literature has a magical or religious purpose? or is in some way tied up with fertility? or satisfies some deep psychological need in mythic terms? ... (I)t has [also] been fashionable to present its function as very specifically 'social': perhaps an unconscious function such as upholding social structure" (Finnegan, 1973:133; see also N. Turner, 1994:61).

follows: "... the implication that non-literate societies do not have 'literature' turns out to be without foundation. This literature, furthermore, can achieve the same range of things we expect from written literature, with all that this means for the mode of thinking in such contexts" (Finnegan, 1973:143).

Yet there is not really – i.e. theoretically – such a thing as oral literature. Finnegan's *proof* of the intellectual, creative and aesthetic nature of the oral text has to be interpreted against the background of a theoretical framework of (written) literature that is, frankly, ill-prepared to receive it. Finnegan's arguments invite us to appreciate the specific nature of the oral text as *oral* literature, as well as to reflect on the theoretical implications of this oral literature for the broader canon of written literature with which we are familiar<sup>10</sup>. But our response to – and, of course, *agreement* with – her arguments have been limited to what has essentially been an anthropological concern: that of a *common humanity*. Okpewho (1983) calls this concern "universalism", which, together with what he terms "parochialism"<sup>11</sup>, has constituted the "contending thrusts" in "oral narrative scholarship". He laments: "our appreciation of the literary merit of traditional [oral] tales has often suffered from the preoccupations of these schools of thought, whether it be to probe the way of life, or the mental disposition, or else the abstract composition underlying the tale" (Okpewho, 1983:264-5). Our preoccupation with denying the "great divide" turns Finnegan's arguments in favour of oral literature into so much anthropological data. As Olabiyi Yai puts it: "(t)he [oral] poet is ... degraded from his status of creator to that of an informant" (quoted in Vail & White, 1991:324). We are a long way from calling Finnegan a literary critic.

The result of this overwhelmingly *anthropological* affirmation of oral literature has been the denial, for the oral text, of whatever aesthetic, intellectual, and, indeed, ideological criteria the model of written literature has been based upon. Of course, this model has been severely contested in post-modernist literary theory; Anthony Easthope (1991:61) talks about the "theory wars" of the eighties in this regard. One of the chief protagonists, Terry Eagleton, argued persuasively in 1983 that "(l)iterature is an illusion" (Eagleton, 1983:204). It turns out, however, that literature is more than an illusion, even if it is decidedly less solid than previously thought. As Tony Bennett writes a few years later, the term

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10 Particularly, I would argue, as regards conceptions of originality and creativity.

11 Universalism defined as "the understanding that human beings all over the world are united by one psychic or spiritual bond", and parochialism as "the tendency to see cultural history in terms of individual societies or cultures and thus to explain cultural similarities across the world ... in terms of progressive historical contacts between one society and another" (Okpewho, 1983:265).

literature, "while its conventional understanding as a uniquely privileged kind of writing cannot be sustained, ... *does cogently designate a specific, but non-unitary, field of institutionally organised practices – of writing, reading, commentary and pedagogy*" (Bennett, 1990:273. Emphasis added). I take this to mean that at the end of the day, in spite of the redundancy of purely "modernist" criteria, the Umberto Eco novel you buy at Exclusive Books is more readily "literature" than the *People* magazine you grab on your way out of Pick 'n Pay. But in our eagerness to attribute "literature" to the oral "other" we happily pretend that differentiation – however defined – between a literary and a non-literary text *never existed*. As long as an oral text can be attributed to an oral *tradition*, it is, simplistically, "literature". As such, an oral text is per definition an oral *literary* text<sup>12</sup>.

This is hardly what Finnegan suggests, however. In relation to the Zulu oral tradition, for example, it is significant that she cites as *particular* evidence of the literariness of the oral text "the lengthy praise-poems ... with their studied use of parallelism and alliteration and their richly figurative style" (Finnegan, 1973:127). Overviews of Zulu oral literature, however, commonly include forms of expression as far removed from the praise poem as lullabies, proverbs and riddles (see Noleen Turner, 1994). The occurrence of these forms in languages with a comparatively long history of literacy will *not* be "literature", but, in all probability, "folklore" (see Finnegan, 1977:1-3).

### 3. A post-modernist view of literature

As already seen, literature emerges from the "theory wars" more or less intact. It continues to be, in Bennett's terms, a "*specific field of institutionally organised practice*". Equally critical of an "essentialist" definition of literature (based on the conventionally presumed *unity* of the literary text – see Easthope, 1991:16-7), Easthope nevertheless insists on the textual particularity of the literary text, which can be read in a "modernist" way when the non-literary text, whose textuality *resists* a modernist reading, cannot (Easthope, 1991:89). Relative to literature, Easthope's "signifying practice" (1991:107) is, then, as *specific* as the "institutionally organised practice" evoked by Bennett: "(l)iterature exists not as an essence, an entity, a thing, but as a process, a function" (Easthope, 1991:53). But if a modernist reading, devoted to the humanist idea of a "best self" universalised "beyond the bounds of class, locality, time or country" (C.H. Herford, quoted in Easthope, 1991:18), *sets apart* the literary from the non-literary, other "post-modern" readings do not commit the same sin. The

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12 Yct, as Finnegan (1977:84) points out, "in many poetic traditions some genres are recognised as less innovative and creative ... (than others)".

following “theoretical interventions” (see Easthope, 1991:65-70) make it possible for the literary and non-literary to be read “alongside each other” (Easthope, 1991:103):

- reading the text as *sign system* (structuralism);
- as representation of *ideology* (post-1968 Marxist critique);
- as representation of *gender* (post-1970 feminist critique);
- as manifestation of the *unconscious* (psycho-analysis – this overlaps with the text as representation of *subject position*);
- as reflective of a particular *institution*, and, finally,
- as broadly reflective of those defined as “other” within the “discourses concerned with race” of a self-substantiating European subject. (More about this conception further on in this discussion.)

At issue, then, is not so much the *destruction* of the literary canon, as a reformulation of the latter’s relation to the *non-literary*. The above-mentioned “readings” place the literary and non-literary text in the same position vis-à-vis the theoretical issue read *against*, undermining the relative privilege and exclusivity the literary text has enjoyed under humanism. Literature is cut down to size. Before it is “literary”, it is, above all – and equally to the non-literary text – *signifying practice*.

#### 4. Oral literature as signifying practice?

I earlier criticised the lack of discernment that has earmarked appraisals of oral texts as “literature”. What it boils down to, in fact, is the inability of the researcher of oral narrative to give the oral text a literary *listening* (literary in Easthope’s conventional “modernist” sense). This is not the place to analyse this inability, which no doubt owes as much to cultural unfamiliarity as to the difficulty of the literate person to conceive of language (and hence, the text) without reference to its visual representation in writing (see Ong, 1967:111-38; 1982:71-4). By the same token, the researcher is clueless as to whether a particular text actually *resists* such a listening. (After all, the overwhelming majority of texts in literate society fall into this category.)

If our modernist attempt at arriving at a conception of oral literature is so fraught with problems, does Easthope’s post-modernist paradigm offer a way out? In common with the particular brand of universalism one can detect in the denunciation of the literate vs oral dichotomy (Vail and White constitute a particularly good example), the post-modernist paradigm Easthope proposes is

freely associated with a "progressive" political project<sup>13</sup>. This is not surprising, for he is also confronting a "great divide"<sup>14</sup>. But is it *the* great divide? The divide that Easthope addresses centres on the binary opposition literature (or "high culture") vs popular culture; Vail and White have it against the opposition literate vs oral. For the former the key-words are capitalism and class – bourgeois and workers; for the latter colonialism and culture – European and African (also perceived as race – white and black).

To his credit, Easthope confronts this distinction. Colonialist imperialism is, of course, also capitalist imperialism<sup>14</sup>. But, as Easthope (1991:134-135) argues, "(w)hile undeniably meanings with a racial content can be seen to derive from economic institutions and their political expressions in nationalism and imperialism, and while again they have become established as inherited forms of ideology, they function in specific modes calling for specific analysis". It is, then, in recognition of the peculiarity of this (racial) divide that he makes the suggestion (gleaned from Edward Said) of "the other" as a theoretically distinct framework for the study of signifying practice.

Easthope's study of signifying practice therefore opens a special window through which "otherness" (including that of "oral societies") can be considered head-on. But what about the *texts* of oral societies? Do these find a place – as signifying practice – in Easthope's post-modernist literary paradigm? To what extent, in other words, can oral literature be theoretically assimilated to popular culture?

## 5. Oral literature / popular culture

A potential stumbling block to the assimilation of oral literature to popular culture would be a certain ideological *exclusivity* associated with the latter. "Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant", writes John Fiske (1989:2), echoing the idea – formulated by Antonio Gramsci – that, as Bennett puts it, "cultural and ideological relations between ruling and subordinate classes in capitalist societies consist less in the *domination* of the latter by the former than in the struggle for *hegemony* ... between the ruling class and ...

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13 Easthope (1991:178) is, however, quick to remind us that, since "every methodology is practised within an institution ... (n)o methodology or theoretical procedure arrives with a radical politics already wired into it ...".

14 Of course, the world has also seen socialist imperialism, the actual *repression* of which Easthope will no doubt concede to (see note 13). As will be seen later, however, debates concerning popular culture have generally addressed themselves to the perceived inequities of capitalist society.



working class” (Bennett, 1986:xiv). The ruling class “seeks to negotiate opposing class cultures onto a cultural and ideological terrain which wins for it a position of leadership” (Bennett, 1986:xv), hence the need – to recall Fiske’s description – for the “subordinated peoples” to (believe that they) act in “their own interests”. While the “negotiatory” aspect of this model to some extent refines the emphasis on actual *repression* in terms of “structuralist” and “culturalist” models of popular culture (see Bennett, 1986:xii<sup>15</sup>), it remains within the broad paradigm of what Easthope refers to as “dominant ideology”: “popular culture ... (is) a set of imposed and constrained meanings ultimately determined by economic power” (Easthope, 1991:72). Economic power means capitalism, and to study how the latter oppresses, cajoles and pussy-foots in order to remain in power is, of course, to undermine it. Studies of popular culture are inherently “left”, Marxist.

Easthope does not propose an alternative theorisation, yet he is, significantly, wary of the implied emphasis on politics at the expense of textuality. Signifying practice is about the transformation of meanings, economic practice about the transformation of raw materials. The two are related, but not the same (Easthope, 1991:110). Drawing primarily on Jacques Derrida’s notion of the dissemination of meaning and Louis Althusser’s conception of a “decentred [historical] totality” (see Easthope, 1991:108-18), Easthope argues that “text and context cannot be thought together within a single [theoretical] coherence” (1991:137). Having thus questioned the “dominant ideology” thesis (as opposed to rejecting it), he is at pains to stress the continued political relevance of his conception. In resolutely departing from the text, his “revised paradigm” of cultural studies (which becomes, of course, the study of signifying practice) can “recapture some of the subtle and powerful *experiential* force literary studies [as conventional seat of textual analysis] always claimed as its speciality” (Easthope, 1991:180). The “experiential force” must have political consequences, especially in so far as, one suspects, it relates to knowledge. “If you ‘put the politics first’ ... you not only risk leaving the prevailing discourse of knowledge untouched – your politics is weakened precisely *because* you are likely to remain outside that discourse”, affirms Easthope (1991:179). By, as it were, using the weapon of the erstwhile “oppressor” (high culture / literature) the politics of cultural studies will be “more effective”.

But how effective will it be for those who, by implication “other” in economics, are *per definition* “other” in anthropology? How inclusive of the study of the oral

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15 Structuralism sees popular culture as an “ideological machine” through which culture is “dictated” or enforced, while in the culturalist perspective popular culture expresses “the authentic interests and values of the subordinated groups and classes” (Bennett, 1986:xii).

text is Easthope's view of the study of popular culture? Writing about the Ju /'hoan, a hunter-gatherer – and quintessentially *oral* – community in north-west Botswana, Megan Biesele points out that "hunting and gathering cultures ... have evolved, just as that of Europe has, and great care should be taken in generalising from present-day hunter-gatherers back to the European Stone Age" (Biesele, 1993:39). They have evolved, yes, but their historical experience has been different. Oral people have been colonised by Western capitalism, but that does not of itself turn them into the "working class" popular culture theorists talk about. To say that would be to play straight into the hands of those who regard oral societies as "changeless" and stunted – until, of course, Western technology gives them history, "civilises" them (notably by teaching them how to read and write).

One word characterises the historical experience of oral societies, a word that is interchanged with "oral" to the point that it has become virtually synonymous to it: *traditional*. In fact, it is only in relation to *tradition* that Parry's groundbreaking revelation as to the orality of the Homeric poems becomes fully understandable: "(o)ral tells us 'how', but traditional tells us 'what', and even more, 'of what kind' and 'of what force'", concludes Albert Lord (1960:220) in his pioneering *The Singer of Tales*. If oral tradition can be aptly characterised as "a chain of interlocking conversations" (Goody & Watt, 1968:29), so, in fact, can oral literature. Audience participation, in Finnegan's words (1977:122), is "integral to the artistic style of a given oral poem" – performer and audience are in a very real sense talking to each other. Oral literature-as-tradition also explains the common association of oral literature with social *function*. Biesele (1993:47) in this regard refers to the "sense-and-consensus making value" of oral narrative.

Literature of oral society is traditional. Literature of literate society is (overwhelmingly) popular, at least as the *signifying practice* Easthope foresees as future object of literary studies. Can the traditional be popular? "We sometimes speak of an oral and a literary tradition being present in the same [literate] society, identifying the former with popular culture and the latter with art", muses Goody (1987:82). Ong (1971) talks about "the literate orality of popular culture" and coins the term "secondary orality" in relation to the "mass media" (see Ong, 1987). Finnegan (1977:6) mentions numerous examples of "industrial songs" having come under the focus of "folklore study".

Assertions such as these would seem to indicate broad areas of theoretical compatibility. In addition, popular culture – like oral literature – has been known to be "formulaic" (Easthope, 1991:91, see also Lindy Stiebel, 1992:49), and there is a striking similarity between the textual characteristics that Easthope (1991:89) uncovers in popular fiction (on the basis of an attempted modernist reading of *Tarzan of the Apes*) and the "psychodynamics" that Ong attributes to oral people

(on the basis, it must be remembered, of their *expressivity*): both are characterised by concreteness, explicitness, a propensity for physical action. “Formally predisposed towards wish-fulfilment instead of duty” (Easthope, 1991:93), popular culture furthermore echos the pervasive association of the oral-traditional text with *pleasure* (see Frederic Turner, 1986).

Against this background Easthope’s insistence on grounding the study of popular culture in textuality rather than politics turns out to be a crucial condition for favouring the rapprochement between the traditional and the popular. As a consequence of this choice, the *specific* historical experience of living in a highly industrialised, capitalist society becomes relatively de-emphasised; popular culture to a large extent loses its ideological exclusivity.

## 6. A continued denial of oral literature

In the development of his alternative post-modernist literary paradigm Easthope completely bypasses the notion of oral literature, yet – ironically – he still manages to effectively exclude it. This exclusion comes in the form of what amounts to something of a throw-away remark, made in connection with the “visual melodrama” of popular culture (which Easthope sees as underlying the latter’s predisposal to pleasure). The *iconic* nature of popular culture favours the occurrence of *narratemes*: “little scenic and narrative epitomes” that are “easily visualised”, such as “Me Tarzan – you Jane” (Easthope, 1991:94). Easthope readily concedes what could so easily have been the decisive step in bridging the divide between “traditional” and “popular”: that the narrateme resembles “myth in *traditional society*” (emphasis added). Unfortunately he immediately qualifies this statement, in the process displaying the very “romantic” or “evolutionist” view of the oral text the latter can do so well without (see Finnegan, 1977:30-41; also Okpewho, 1983:1-15): “(b)ut with this difference. Myth, one could say, partakes of nature and necessity rather than culture and freedom; the popular cultural narrateme moves beyond nature into culture – it is thoroughly a construction ...” (Easthope, 1991:95)<sup>16</sup>.

Easthope opened the political window only to close the textual door. Of course, depending on the oral society, the mythical may well account for only a relatively small part of oral artistic expression. Yet it is such a pervasive *genre* that its particular juxtaposition, in this case, amounts to a statement on oral (traditional) texts in general. The oral-traditional is (perhaps) popular, but, then again, it simply is not culture... The two great divides of “literate vs oral” and “literature

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16 This view of myth being somehow “natural” will certainly not hold with Okpewho (1983), who builds his “aesthetic” approach to myth around the notions of *ingenuity* and *fantasy*.

vs popular culture" continue to be distinct, parallel, when they could so easily have been conceptualised – at the very least – as a continuum.

## 7. Conclusion

The discovery of the oral roots of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was crucial to the degree that it clearly pointed towards the existence of a distinctly oral model of creativity. A large part of subsequent research done in Oral Theory<sup>17</sup> has been devoted to the refinement of this model (see John Miles Foley, 1988). The "constructedness" of the oral text, even if its basis of construction is different to that of the written, should no longer be in question. And the time has come, perhaps, to take the term "popular" at its face value of "well-liked by many people" (Raymond Williams, quoted in Easthope, 1991:76) and realise that the oral text *has to be* popular if it is to successfully function within the oral-traditional paradigm generally assigned to it. This procedure will, at last, enable the oral text to fully be *signifying practice* within a revised post-modernist conception of literary studies. Literate vs oral will become subsumed into literature vs popular culture, and the notion of oral literature will, for the first time, gain some kind of *literary* validity.

Of course, to say that the popular is what is "well-liked" means running the risk of being called politically naïve. Then again, is it not in any case naïve to try crossing (out) the great divide?

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17 "Oral Theory" has been conceptualised as such by Foley (1988), and refers to research on oral narrative and poetry in the wake of Parry's demonstration (as "popularized" by Lord) of the oral origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

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