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To Speak Like a Bird: Beyond a Literary *Topos*

Abstract: The idea that poets can understand and imitate the birds' voice is much more than a literary *topos*. In this paper an anthropological approach and the theory of unconscious formulated by Ignacio Matte Blanco cast a new light on the ancient Greek sources that provide important evidence on the topic (Alcman, Hesiod and Aristotle *in primis*). Poets can understand the language of the birds because they are special gifted men, like seers and prophets. The interesting history of Wakdjūnkaga the trickster demonstrates that these *maîtres de vérité* can experience in everyday life what was common to all human beings during the prehistoric Age.

Keywords: Alcman; poetics; trickster; Matte Blanco; theory of language.

Greek poetry from the Archaic period offers some examples of an image found in many other cultures: gifted men who can speak and understand the song of birds and other animals.¹ In particular, the poet's voice can be considered as a human version of the birds.²

The starting point of every investigation about this subject is a well-known fragment by Alcman, affected by many textual problems. We quote it as it is pre-

1 On folk tales and myths about people who can speak with animals, and in particular with birds, see Frazer 1931; Bettini 2018, 183–208; *MIFL* B216; B217. In the *Quran* (27:16) both Solomon and David claim to have been taught the language of the birds. According to the *midrashim* tradition, Solomon was able to understand birds and practice ornithomancy, see Shemesh 2018, 4–7. The motif is widespread in Norse mythology, too, where Odin usually speaks with the ravens Hugin and Munin. Furthermore, Sigurd learns the language of the birds when he accidentally tasted the blood of Fafnir the dragon (see Bettini 2018, 194–200). The knowledge of the language of birds can also be traced within the esoteric tradition: Sufism, Kabbalah, Renaissance magic, and alchemy.

2 Already in the Mycenaean period we can find in Greece documents that associate poets/singers and birds: the pyxis from Kalamí, now displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Khania (Crete), Mus. Khania, inv. 2308, that dates to LM III A2-B (1350–1200 BC; see Betancourt 2007, 190) and the fresco from the Throne hall of the Pylos' palace (LH III B2, 1250–1200 BC; see Lang 1969, 79–80; Immerwahr 1990, 133–134). In both images a singer/player is at direct contact with birds. In the Pylos' fresco a big bird seems to fly directly from the singer. Even in the vedic tradition, lines can be represented as flying birds, see Durante 1976, 124.

sented in the two most recent editions, which are very different as to their interpretation of the rare word γεγλωσσαμέναν at line two.³

Alcm. fr. 39 Davies
 φέπη τάδε καὶ μέλος Ἀλκμάν
 εὖρε γεγλωσσαμέναν
 κακκαβίδων ὅπα συνθέμενος

Alcm. fr. 91 Calame
 ἔπη δέ γε καὶ μέλος Ἀλκμάν
 εὖρε †τε γλωσσαμενον†
 κακκαβίδων ὅπα συνθέμενος

We have these lines thanks to the quotation by Athenaeus, who explains their meaning following the opinion of Chamaeleon about this poem:

Athen. 9, 390a (II 350 Kaibee)
 σαφῶς ἐμφανίζων ὅτι παρὰ τῶν περδίκων ἄδιδεν ἐμάνθανε [*scil.* Alcman], διὸ καὶ Χαμαιλέων ὁ Ποντικός [fr. 24 Wehrli] ἔφη τὴν εὖρεσιν τῆς μουσικῆς τοῖς ἀρχαίοις ἐπινοηθῆναι ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν ταῖς ἐρημίαις ἄδόντων ὀρνίθων· ὧν κατὰ μίμησιν λαβεῖν στάσιν τὴν μουσικήν. οὐ πάντες δ' οἱ πέρδικες, φησί, κακκαβίζουσιν.

According to Chamaeleon, who devoted specific attention to Alcman (cf. also fr. 25 Wehrli), the Greeks of the ancient times thought that men learned to sing by imitating the birds' songs they heard in the most isolated places.

More than a century before Chamaeleon, the philosopher Democritus stated that the men learned many important activities from the animals: for example, weaving and building. Singing is one of these activities. Men learned to sing by imitating birds.

Democrit. 68 B154 D.–K.
 ὁ Δ. ἀποφαίνει μαθητὰς (*scil.* of the animals) ἐν τοῖς μεγίστοις γεγονότας ἡμᾶς [...] τῶν λιγυρῶν, κύκνου καὶ ἀηδόνας, ἐν ᾧδιῃ κατὰ μίμησιν.

Democritus introduced the general idea that it was natural for men to imitate birds and other animals. Many years before the *Poetics* by Aristotle, the philo-

³ γεγλωσσαμέναν (or γεγλωσσαμένον) is the best correction of the γλωσσαμενον offered by the manuscripts (see Degani/Burzacchini 1977, 287; Brillante 1991, 155–157). Against this correction see the arguments by Calame 1983, commentary *ad* fr. 91. For the reasons I will show I consider the text with γεγλωσσαμέναν as more suitable to the general idea expressed in this poem.

sopher from Abdera seems to be well conscious that imitation is a natural cognitive process for men.⁴

Democritus' idea had a famous follower in the Latin literature, where we find very similar words in the *De rerum natura* by Lucretius:

Lucr., *de rer. nat.* 5, 1379–1381
At liquidas avium voces imitauer ore
ante fuit multo quam levia carmina cantu
concelebrare homines possent aurisque iuvare

In his anthropological survey about the development of humankind, Lucretius considers imitation of the sounds of nature, *in primis* birdsong, as the origin of the human language. The first men were able to sing like the birds even before they began to speak a human language and perform poems. The idea that songs and poems preceded the use of prosaic speech will be re-proposed by many philosophers who dealt with the origin of language, in particular during the debate on this topic that developed in the 18th century.⁵

Modern scholars have supported, with a variety of arguments, the idea that the Greeks considered poetic activity as a matter of imitation. Bruno Gentili has formulated a very clear definition of this fundamental conception:

The actual activities of the poet – devising and constructing – are thus conceived as mimesis – the imitation of nature and human life. Conscious formulations of this idea appear as early as the fifth century, presenting imitation either as a re-creation, through voice, music, dance, and gesture, of the actions and utterances of men and animals – or, with more specific reference to the figurative arts, as the production of an inanimate, visible object that is a realistic replica of something living.⁶

It is hard to find a better example of this idea of poetry than that displayed by Pindar in the XII *Pythian ode*:

Pind., *Pyth.* 12, 7–8
 Πάλλας ἐφεῦρε (scil. the art of playing the *aulos*) θρασειᾶν <Γοργόνων>
 οὔλιον θρῆνον διαπλέξαισ' Ἀθήνα

⁴ Plato's position (*Resp.* 10, 595a-607a) recognizes the mimetic nature of poetry yet criticizes poetry as the superficial imitation of an object. Plato is very far from asserting that imitation is a universal cognitive process.

⁵ See Gozzano in this volume, 1–17.

⁶ Gentili 1988, 51, but see the whole chapter 4 *The Poetics of Mimesis* (whose penetrating arguments can be traced in Gentili 1971).

Pind., *Pyth.* 12, 19–21

[...] παρθένος αὐλῶν τεύχε πάμφωνον μέλος,
 ὄφρα τὸν Εὐρυάλας ἐκ καρπαλιμῶν γενύων
 χριμφθέντα σὺν ἔντεσι μιμήσαιτ' ἐρικλάγκταν γόνον.

The goddess Athena invented the art of playing the *aulos* by imitating the shrill cries and noises uttered by the Gorgons and by the snakes they had for hair when Medusa's head was cut by Perseus. The object of this artistic imitation was the real lament of Euryale (γόος); its final artistic product was the *threnos*, that is, a gloomy music for an *aulos* solo quite similar to the funerary lament. The distinction between the object imitated and the result of the mimetic process is strongly underlined by the two different words that Pindar uses: γόος – θρηῖνος.⁷ Pindar seems to be aware of the difference between reality and its imitation. When a poem imitates something real, the imitation cannot be exactly the same thing as the imitated object. This general conception of poetry seems to be slightly different from Alcman's poem about partridges.

But if imitation is in general terms closely connected with poetic composition, the specific imitation of the birds' song seems to rely on more concrete reasons. Aristotle and his followers, among whom we must consider the aforementioned Chamaeleon, were deeply engaged in understanding why men and birds are so close as regards to linguistic skills. Aristotle was the first to propose an explanation based on anatomic similarities.

Arist., *Hist. An.* 4, 535a 27–535b 2

φωνῆ καὶ ψόφος ἕτερόν ἐστι, καὶ τρίτον διάλεκτος. φωνεῖ μὲν οὖν οὐδενὶ τῶν ἄλλων μορίων οὐδὲν πλὴν τῷ φάρυγγι· διὸ ὅσα μὴ ἔχει πλεύμονα, οὐδὲ φθέγγεται· διάλεκτος δ' ἡ τῆς φωνῆς ἐστὶ τῇ γλώττῃ διάρθρωσις. τὰ μὲν οὖν φωνήεντα ἢ φωνῆ καὶ ὁ λάρυγξ ἀφίησιν, τὰ δ' ἄφωνα ἢ (535b) γλώττα καὶ τὰ χεῖλη· ἐξ ὧν ἡ διάλεκτός ἐστιν. διὸ ὅσα γλώτταν μὴ ἔχει ἢ μὴ ἀπολελυμένην, οὐ διαλέγεται. ψοφεῖν δ' ἐστὶ καὶ ἄλλοις μορίοις.

Arist., *Hist. An.* 4, 536a 20–536b 2

τὸ δὲ τῶν ὀρνίθων γένος ἀφίησι φωνήν· καὶ μάλιστα ἔχει διάλεκτον ὅσοις ὑπάρχει ἡ γλώττα πλατεῖα, καὶ ὅσα ἔχουσι τὴν γλώτταν αὐτῶν λεπτήν. [...] τὰ δὲ ζωοτόκα (536b) καὶ τετραπόδα ζῶα ἄλλο ἄλλην φωνὴν ἀφίησι, διάλεκτον δ' οὐδὲν ἔχει, ἀλλ' ἴδιον τοῦτ' ἀνθρώπου ἐστίν· ὅσα μὲν γὰρ διάλεκτον ἔχει, καὶ φωνὴν ἔχει, ὅσα δὲ φωνὴν, οὐ πάντα διάλεκτον.

Aristotle clearly distinguishes between noise (ψόφος), sound (φωνή) and language (διάλεκτος). The most complex skill, that is language, is the distinctive feature of human beings and of those birds that have a thin tongue. Only men and

7 For a more detailed analysis of this passage see Gentili 1995, *ad loc.* and Palmisciano 2017, 186–188.

birds are able to articulate sounds in order to produce a linguistic utterance, other animals can only produce sounds without meaning.⁸

According to the tradition discussed above, it could seem clear that Alcman provides the most ancient example of the idea that poetry was a mimetic activity and that the poets considered birds to be the most suitable object of imitation by reason of their affinity with human beings. However, this explanation is only partially correct.

When Alcman claims to be able to produce poetic words similar to birdsong, he aims to distinguish himself from ordinary people.⁹ Everyone can try to imitate birds' song by singing or whistling, but true imitation of the birds' voice requires a particular skill.

If we scrutinize Alcman's words we find more than imitation. Alcman claims to be able to understand the birds' singing and to translate the partridges' song to a human voice, made of sound and meaning. We must not neglect the two key-words we find at the beginning of the fragment: *φέπη* [...] *καὶ μέλος*. Alcman has found not only the right music but also the right words. The partridge's song has a meaning and the poet is able to understand it. Whatever choice we make about the problematic *†τε γλωσσαμενον†* in line 2, it is hard to deny that the word recalls the domain of the *γλώσσα*, not in its anatomic meaning but referring to human speech. The text as presented by Davies (and accepted by most scholars) restores a poem full of meaning and interesting implications. Two slightly different translations are possible:

Alcman found these words and music, giving poetic form (*συνθέμενος*) to the partridges' voice, translated with human words.

Or with different interpretation of *συνθέμενος*:

Alcman found these words and music, and after having understood the partridges' voice, he translated it with human words.¹⁰

8 For an overall investigation of Aristotle's ideas on the relationships between human and other animals' language see Ax 1978; Labarrière 2007; Manetti 2011. Modern ethologists have reduced the distance between animals and men regarding linguistic skills: see Ercolani in this volume, 89–103.

9 See the interesting reflections by Bettini 2018, 121–125, in particular 125.

10 Among the meanings of the verb *συντίθημι* we find both “compose” (see LSJ s.v. II 3) and “give heed, perceive” (see LSJ s.v. B I). For a thorough study of this word see Brillante 1991, 153–154. The connection between *ῥπα* and *γεγλωσσαμέναν* is well explained by Gentili 1971, 62: “il nesso *γεγλωσσαμέναν ῥπα συνθέμενος* istituisce i modi concreti del poetare, esplicita programmaticamente *come* e per quale *via* (verbalizzando, cioè, la voce delle pernici) il poeta ‘ha trovato’ i due elementi compositivi del carne, la parola e la melodia”.

Every effort to translate this fragment, however, can hardly reach the superb quality of the translation by the Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo (*Lirici greci*, 1940):

Questi versi e la loro cadenza
trovò Alcmane, imitando con parole
quello che aveva inteso
dal canto delle pernici.

I have started with Alcman's fragment 39 because this poem offers the most detailed description of the complex relationship that the poet establishes with the voice of the birds. With this premise I hope it would be more clear the meaning of another well known fragment, in which Alcman claims to know the songs of every kind of bird:¹¹

Alcm. fr. 40 Davies = 140 Calame
οἶδα δ' ὀρνίχων νόμωσ
παντῶν

In this short fragment Alcman says nothing about how he acquired the special knowledge of which he boasts. The verb οἶδα at the beginning simply states that he possesses it. The word νόμωσ recalls the idea that the birds' song can be considered as a codified song. Alcman claims to know an uncountable amount of songs, corresponding to the endless variety of the melodies uttered by the singing birds.

The skill boasted by Alcman can be found elsewhere. Continuing the topic of poets' lives, a very singular, and mostly neglected, tradition about Homer's life tells that Homer was son of two Egyptians and that his nurse was a prophet, daughter of the priest of Isis. Once, honey flowed from her breast in Homer's mouth and the baby, during the night, uttered the voice of nine different birds. The nurse, then, found the baby playing with nine doves on his bed. One day, in a state of possession, she pronounced some prophetic lines in which she foresaw that the baby will be famous and that he will build a temple to the nine Pierides. For this reason Homer always respected birds.

Eust. in *Od.* 12, 63 [1713, 17] = De Martino 1984, 140–141
Ἀλέξανδρος δὲ ὁ Πάφιος ἱστορεῖ τὸν Ὅμηρον υἱὸν Αἰγυπτίων Δμασαγόρου [cf. *Cert. Hom. Hes.* 3, 21 = 758 *FGrHist* 13c Καλλικλῆς δὲ †Μασσαγόραν] καὶ Αἴθρας, τροφὸν δὲ αὐτοῦ προ-

¹¹ See *contra* Calame 1983, 548, who refers the “I” speaking in the poem to the performers of the chorus.

φήτιν τινὰ θυγατέρα (20) ὄρου, ἱερέως Ἰσιδος, ἥς ἐκ τῶν μαστῶν μέλι ρεῦσαι ποτὲ εἰς τὸ στόμα τοῦ παιδίου. καὶ τὸ βρέφος ἐν νυκτὶ φωνὰς ἐννέα προέσθαι, χελιδόνος, ταῦνος, περιστερᾶς, κορώνης, πέρδικος, πορφυρίωνος, ψαρὸς, ἀηδόνης, καὶ κοττύφου· εὐρεθῆναί τε τὸ παιδίον μετὰ περιστερῶν ἐννέα παίζον ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης. εὐωχομένην δὲ παρὰ τοῖς τοῦ παιδὸς τὴν Σιβύλλαν, ἔμμανῆ γεγονουίαν, ἔπη σχεδιάσαι. ὧν ἀρχή, Δμασαγόρα πολύνικε, ἐν οἷς καὶ μεγακλεῆ καὶ στεφανίτην αὐτὸν προσειπεῖν, καὶ ναὸν κτίσαι κελεῦσαι ἐννέα Πιερίδων (25)· ἐδήλου δὲ τὰς Μούσας. τὸν δὲ καὶ τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, καὶ τῷ παιδί ἀνδρωθῆντι ἐξειπεῖν τὸ πρᾶγμα. καὶ τὸν ποιητὴν οὕτω σεμνῦναι τὰ ζῶα οἷς βρέφος ὧν συνέπαιζε.

It seems noteworthy that the most distinct feature that defines the prodigious nature of the young Homer is precisely his skill in speaking the language of birds, and that even if this tradition is as old as that of the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi*,¹² the fact that the poets are able to speak like a bird goes back to a more ancient tradition. To be cautious, the tradition is at least as old as Alcman's poetry.

Poets' special relationship with the birds is a feature that connects them with other special people such as seers and prophets.¹³ The birds' signs can be the subject of an archaic poem, as it is well displayed by the *Bird omens (Ornithomanteia)* assigned to Hesiod, a poem that was attached to the end of *Works and Days* in a specific branch of the Hesiodic tradition.¹⁴ The final lines of *Works and Days* are a reminder of the importance of correctly interpreting the signs coming from the birds to live in the right way.

Hes., *Op.* 826–828
 [...] ὄλβιος ὃς τάδε πάντα
 εἰδῶς ἐργάζεται ἀναίτιος ἀθανάτοισιν,
 ὄρνιθας κρίνων καὶ ὑπερβασίας ἀλεινῶν

Hesiod was concerned with prophecy. Pausanias (9, 31, 5) says that Hesiod was taught about mantic art in Acharnania and that it was still possible to read the

¹² See Bassino 2019, 115, who mentions the earlier sources (say, 5th century BC) of the materials included in the *Certamen*. See also p. 125, *ad* 21 for a commentary on Callicles' information about Homer's father.

¹³ In Soph., *Ant.* 1021, the seer Teiresias says that the birds' song is no more intelligible for him due to the *miasma* spread by Oedipus: οὐδ' ὄρνις εὐσήμους ἀπορροιβδεῖ βοάς. Porphyrius recalls that the old prophets like Teiresias and Melampous were able to understand the language of the birds: Porph., *de abst.* 3, 6 εἰ δεῖ πιστεῦναι τοῖς παλαιοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἐφ' ἡμῶν καὶ τῶν πατέρων γεγονόσιν, εἰσὶν οἱ λέγονται ἐπακοῦσαι καὶ σύνεσιν ἔχειν τῆς τῶν ζῴων φθέγγεως· ὡς ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν παλαιῶν ὁ Μελάμπους καὶ ὁ Τειρεσίας καὶ οἱ τοιοῦτοι.

¹⁴ We do not have reasons to consider worthless the words of *schol.* Hes. *Op.* 828 a, 3 (p. 259 Pertusi) τούτοις δὲ ἐπάγουσιν τινες τὴν Ὀρνιθομαντείαν <***>. See Ercolani 2010, 436–437 *ad loc.*

ἔπη μαντικά he composed. Another Hesiodic poem, the *Melampodia*, concerned the figure of the prophet Melampus. It is possible that the title *Explanation of prodigies* was another form of the title *Ornithomanteia*, but it is also possible that it was a different work.¹⁵

To summarize, the tradition of the poet as a wise man (or cultural hero) able to speak and understand the language of the birds and interpret the signs that birds expressed to men, confirms the general idea that the archaic poets, by reason of their exceptional qualities and their divine gifts, must be considered among the σοφοί, or, in the well-known definition by Marcel Detienne, as *mâitres de vérité*.¹⁶

It is possible to go further still. It is very tempting to try to connect the idea that the poets know the language of the birds with views about the life of the most ancient men. As we have seen, the Greeks seem to be aware that in the most ancient times men (all men, not only the poets) learned to sing from the birds. The passages by Democritus, Chamaeleon, Lucretius quoted above can be considered an attempt to build a rational explanation of the process that led men to acquire the skill to sing and compose poems. But the boundaries between those rational ponderings and a mythical tale are not well established. Democritus' and Lucretius' theories cannot be proven. If we accept them, we take them as self-evident and not because they are founded on tested evidence. They are nothing but fascinating myths.

For these reasons, we can find some help to better understand the idea that the poets can speak the language of the birds, even outside Greece, in the myths of other cultures. A comparative approach can offer new perspectives to the reading of the Greek authors. A precious source of inspiration are the astonishing histories about an American trickster. In 1956 a book was published by the anthropologist Paul Radin,¹⁷ who collected the tales about Waktjûnkaga, a sacred character of the Winnibago, a tribe of the Sioux nation. The book could boast the collaboration of Carl Gustav Jung and Karl Kerényi and thanks to the fame of the authors and to the English translation made in 1956 (Radin 1956), Waktjûnkaga and the figure of the trickster became familiar to everyone concerned with anthropological studies.

15 For an introduction to the corpus Hesiodeum see Cingano 2009, who considers, however, the *Explanation of prodigies* as a different title of the *Ornithomanteia*.

16 A fragment by Heraclitus, 22 B57 D.-K. διδάσκαλος δὲ πλείστων Ἡσίοδος· τοῦτον ἐπίστανται πλείστα εἰδέναι demonstrates that Hesiod, like Homer, was considered by the ancients as a *mâitre de vérité*. On Hesiod's poetry as an example of "wisdom poetry" see the remarkable studies by Ercolani (Ercolani 2010, Ercolani 2012, Ercolani 2016).

17 Radin 1956.

Wakdjûnkaga was a chieftain. The day before a battle he violated the traditional rules and he was criticized by the other warriors. He then renounced his social status and went far from his tribe. Once he abandoned his weapons, his canoe and his status symbols he became something different from a human being. He had no more self-consciousness. He did not perceive the boundaries of his own body. When he slayed a deer, his right hand, which was cutting the deer with a knife, quarreled with his left, and eventually the right hand wounded deeply the left (Radin 1956, chapters 4 and 5). In a climax of violence, Wakdjûnkaga inflicts the most painful cruelties and cannibalizes himself. Wakdjûnkaga can also change his gender. He can assume a female identity and give birth to a child.¹⁸ As a female he/she got married with a warrior but also with a fox and other animals (chapter 20). Neither man nor woman, Wakdjûnkaga is no more a human being than he is an animal. Thanks to his extraordinary qualities Wakdjûnkaga is also responsible for many inventions very useful to mankind. He creates and gives order to reality, granting names to things. The linguistic skills of Wakdjûnkaga are very interesting for our discussion. When he renounced his role as chieftain and began a new life,

from there on he continued alone. He ambled along calling all the objects in the world younger brothers when speaking to them. He and all objects in the world understood one another, understood, indeed, one another's language (Radin 1956, 7).

Wakdjûnkaga can speak to all things and to all animals, and all things and all animals can speak to him because he understands them. This is the first skill that he experimented in his new life. He can speak the many languages of nature because there is no clear distinction between him and nature. The myths about Wakdjûnkaga are the myths about a primordial age in which men and nature were one and the same. In this respect it is hard to find more penetrating words than those of C. G. Jung:

this phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages [...]. He is obviously a 'psychologem', an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity. In his clearest manifestations he is a faithful copy of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level (Jung 1956, 200).

¹⁸ This aspect is consistent with the myth of the seer Tiresias who once became a woman and then came back to the male identity: *Ov., Met.* 3, 323–331.

The idea that there has been a phase in which the single cannot be separated from the whole can be traced back already in an enlightening explanation of totemism by Jane Harrison:

[totemism] stands for fusion, for non-differentiation. Man cannot project his individual self, because that individual self is as yet in part undivided; he cannot project his individual human will, because that human will is felt chiefly as one with the undifferentiated *mana* of the world; he cannot project his individual soul because that complex thing is as yet not completely compounded.¹⁹

Harrison's position is consistent with Lévy-Bruhl's theories (Lévy-Bruhl 1910) about the cognitive processes of primitive men. The French anthropologist sustained that the *principium individuationis* does not belong to this phase of human development.

The psychic condition of the trickster can also be experienced by modern men. Some hints of the trickster's awareness of his own boundaries can be detected in the first phases of babies' evolution, who are very concerned with their own bodily exploration. Self-aggression is a common experience of animals, for example dogs that bite their own tail or paw because they do not perceive their own body's limits. Among men, self-injury can be observed in many pathological states of mind. Even well-tempered adult humans can, however, enter a mental condition in which there is no distinction at all between self and other, rational and irrational, aware and not aware. I refer to the condition in which the unconscious displays its power. I draw here from the notion of unconscious of Ignacio Matte Blanco, the Chilean psychologist who undertook a deep revision of Sigmund Freud's theory. Matte Blanco developed an original theory of the unconscious named the theory of bi-logic (see Matte Blanco 1975). In this theory he considered the unconscious not as the state of mind in which the repressed aspects of our personality are expressed, but as a different way to think, quite similar to the processes of the more advanced mathematical theories, in particular that of Dedekind. In the mathematics of infinity, the principle of non-contradiction has no relevance and it is impossible to distinguish between part and whole. According to Matte Blanco, the human unconscious works in a similar way. In 1988 the Chilean psychologist published a book in which he elucidated the developments of the bi-logic theory formulated in 1975.²⁰ Matte Blanco unifies the sphere of thinking and the sphere of feeling in the unconscious dimension. The natural tendency of thinking to divide and distinguish, and the

¹⁹ Harrison 1927, 122.

²⁰ Matte Blanco 1988.

natural tendency of feeling to unify, cannot be separated. They support each other. This happens in the bi-logic structure, which is active when we consider the same reality as formed at the same time by parts and simultaneously as an undivisible whole. The bi-logic structure has different levels of complexity. In the fifth and most complex level every form of thought is impossible. Any one thing cannot be distinguished from anything else. All things form one only indivisible thing. This is exactly the condition represented in the myths about Wakdjûnkaga. This is exactly the condition which Harrison, Levy-Bruhl and Jung refer to.

It is time now to go back to Alcman and the Greek poets. The theoretical frame we have sketched can give a more solid explanation to the archaic poets' claims to be able to speak and understand birdsong. The poets wanted to be considered as extraordinary people, but the skills they boast can be appreciated by everyone, since according to the tales about the most ancient times it was common to speak and understand the voices of other animals, birds in particular. The poets keep alive the experience of ancient men, when they were one only thing with nature. Ordinary people can have indirect access to this privileged experience during infancy or in the oneiric states of mind when the unconscious reproduces the same conditions as ancient men. It is not by chance that the tale about Homer reported by Eustathius combines infancy and dream.

The Greeks were familiar with the idea that a man can become something different from a human being. Their myths offer plenty of tales about metamorphosis to another form. For the same reasons they easily admitted the existence of hybrid creatures like centaurs, satyrs, nymphs and dryades, which remind us that it is possible to be simultaneously a man and something different from a human being. Within this general idea we must place the tales about the poets' portentous skills. When Alcman claims to understand and speak birdsong he is building a mythical tale to give authority to his own words. We can consider this tale as we consider Hesiod's or Archilocus' tales about their meeting with the Muses, since for the Greeks it was normal to refer to gods the true fact that poets, like seers or prophets, were exceptionally gifted people.

The particular skills of which Alcman boasts are deeply linked with orality, since they originate in sounds and produce sounds. It is relevant that in different cultures, when we are told of people who can speak an unknown language (xenoglossy) or a non-human language (glossolaly) we are never told that people are able *to write* that language, and on the contrary we are always told that people are able *to speak* that language.²¹ It is evident that to use a writing system

21 See for example the miracle produced by the Holy Spirit during the Pentecost, when Jesus'

requires the use of abstraction and conscious thought. This implies that the bi-logic structures, to recall Matte Blanco's theory, cannot work, while orality is perfectly coherent with the conditions in which men perceive a continuum between themselves and the world around them, and in which there is no clear perception of the specific nor of the individual identity. Orality is then the only possible form of communication in those states of mind in which is impossible to keep conscious and unconscious thought separated.

In conclusion, comparing the poet's voice to birdsong is much more than a literary *topos*. It is a living fragment of memory coming from the deepest layers of the human experience. It is a timeless truth about the evolution of mankind that Greeks expressed in mythical form. An idea that modern anthropology, developmental psychology and theories of the unconscious can now explain with more solid evidence.

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apostles could speak unknown languages (*NT Acts 2:4*). For the quite similar phenomenon of glossolaly in ancient and modern times see Bettini 2018, 159–181.

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