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Foreword

Michelle Ryan-Sautour, Benaouda Lebdai and Laurent Lepaludier

1 On the 25th and 26th of November 2005, an international conference on orality in short fiction was organized at the University of Angers, France, bringing together participants from many different countries. Throughout the two days of workshops, the conference members were pleased to be “speaking the same language” as they were able to focus on the theme of oral effects in written literature. Some were pleased to be able to evoke names such as that of Walter Ong, and enter directly into their argumentation without having to set up the theoretical groundwork. Other participants joked about the link between the theme of the conference and the loquaciousness of the group, as the sound level at coffee breaks often reached considerable levels.

2 We were also graced by the presence of jazz singer and author, Sandi Russell, who was kind enough to read part of her upcoming novel, Tidewater. In an interview at the end of the conference, she answered questions about the oral and musical dimension of her fiction, and commented on her critical writing about African-American women authors. The transcription of this interview appears at the end of this collection. Sandi Russell also added a musical note to our discussions on orality with her jazz singing performance on the Friday evening of the conference.

3 It was a fruitful conference, and the following series of articles is a selection of the papers presented.

4 Laurent Lepaludier, in his article, “What is this Voice I Read?: Problematics of Orality in the Short Story” sets up a conceptual framework as a starting point for the study of orality, exploring the dynamics of the relationship between orality and literacy, and examining the forms and effects orality produces in literature. Ultimately, he suggests such research questions could lead to studies of the function of orality, and the issue of orality and the literary canon.

5 John Ford, in “In Romance as We Read and as We Hear in Geste: Written Orality in the Medieval Short Story, The Verse Romance’s of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries” studies the transition from an oral to a written tradition, examining in detail the English verse romances. He focuses primarily on the characteristic use of oral
formulae such as parataxis, the retention of exhortative direct address and phatic discourse between the narrative voice and the audience, and explores their relationship with the written culture evident in their *mise-en-page* and numerous literary references. Ford also studies the historical dimension of this tension between literacy and orality and reflects upon its potential effect in contemporary literature.

Anthony Cordingley, in his article, “The Reading Eye from Scriptura Continua to Modernism: Orality and Punctuation between Beckett’s *L’image* and *Comment c’est*/ *How it Is*,” proceeds to study the absence of punctuation in Samuel Beckett’s French prose piece, *L’image*, and explores the oral implications, suggesting that Beckett’s text displays its desire to be heard as sound. Cordingley also studies the implications of the integration of this piece into Beckett’s novel, *Commet c’est*/ *How it Is*, in which the rhythmical arrangement organizes sense, and compels the reader to listen in order to understand. Cordingley places a special emphasis on the manner in which the production of an “oral” text within a graphic culture not only requires a departure from graphic conventions of the page, but also from the prosodic rhythms which organize speech within the culture itself.

Laurence Cossu-Beaumont addresses the cultural and political dimension of orality in her article on Richard Wright, “Orality in Richard Wright’s Short Stories: Playing and Surviving.” Cossu-Beaumont suggests that in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) and *Eight Men* (1961), orality is not only a means to create verisimilitude for Wright’s portraits of black men and women, but also has the function of a narrative. In reference to Henry Louis Gates Jr., she examines the potential for the vernacular tradition of *signifyin(g)* to subvert traditional black representations and to alter prejudice in Wright’s fiction. She identifies orality as being not only a central theme of African American life as represented in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Eight Men*, but also a primary tenet of Wright’s aesthetics and a means of survival.

Trinna Frever also concentrates her attention on orality in American literature with her study of Zora Neale Hurston’s writing, “‘Mah Story Ends, or Does It?’ Orality in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘The Eatonville Anthology’.” Her article analyzes the intersection of oral, musical, dance, and print forms within a short work by the Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston. Frever argues that “The Eatonville Anthology,” though receiving little critical attention compared to Hurston’s more famous *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a representation of oral-print narrative aesthetics in its own right. She places particular emphasis on Hurston’s creation of a “community narrative” through her use of the oral voice, and on her composition of individually focused texts as a narrative whole.

A focus on orality and community reappears in Fabienne Garcier’s article, “A Modern *Seanachie*: Oral Storytelling Structures in Frank O’Connor’s Short Stories.” Garcier explores the implications of orality in relation to the Gaelic-speaking communities of the West of Ireland as represented in Frank O’Connor’s *Bones of Contention* (1936). In this text, Frank O’Connor observes the issues of conflict and discord in post-independence Ireland from the point of view of the people. Through a study of the public scene and the role of the narrator as traditional storyteller, or *seanachie*, Garcier studies how the text recreates in writing the empathetic relations between teller and audience, and transforms some specific features of orally based expression such as “double-speak” or discursive structures of oral storytelling such as digressive, alliterative “runs” into written forms of multivocality and dialogism. Garcier also raises the question of
O'Connor's position as mediator between two cultures, oral and written, Gaelic and English.

10 Teresa Gibert's paper, "Written Orality in Thomas King's Short Fiction," studies the presence of oral patterns of narration characteristic of Native Canadian storytelling in Thomas King's short fiction. King's short stories, according to Gibert, establish a constant dialogue between oral and textual traditions that parodies master-narratives and subverts the conventions created by the dominant discourse. Gibert observes Thomas King's adoption of a style of presentation intended to render the specific nuances of the typical storytellers' rhythms of speech (e.g. intentional digressions, lists and repetitions, frequent pauses, elision of verbs, extremely brief sentences, punctuation and line breaks that echo storytelling cadences, together with parataxis). She also notes how King's written orality has become an effective tool of communication in portraying members of today's thriving Native communities and contributing to the renewal of their identity in contemporary Canada.

11 Laurie Kruk links the idea of community to that of family and orality in her article, "Storykeepers: Circling Family Voice in Stories by Thomas King, Alistar MacLeod, Olive Senior and Guy Vanderhaeghe". According to Kruk, the first-person narrative voices of these writers all reflect notions of family: the idea of “relations” in Thomas King’s tale “A Columbus Coyote Story,” the concept of community of neighbors and bystanders in Olive Senior’s “You Think I Mad, Miss?”, Alistair Macleod’s idea of ancestry in his “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s portrait of the contemporary nuclear family in “Cages.” Kruk places special emphasis on how these texts highlight the hybrid nature of communication and reveal different underlying levels of authority/authorization in disrupting the monological voice and testing the boundaries of canonized fiction. Kruk's work on author interviews as “stories of voice” is also drawn upon to study the rhetorical performance of voice – the construction of a “family of voices” for the author/performer in interview as well as their “voices of family” in fiction.

12 The focus on voice is indeed recurrent, as is evident in Denise Ginfray's article, "Voicing and Voices in Two Australian Short Stories: 'The Hairy Man' (Henry Lawson, 1907) and 'The Curse' (Katharine Susannah Prichard, 1932)." Ginfray's article examines two types of fictional narrative and explores their discursive strategies in relation to various aspects of “written orality.” According to Ginfray, the “bush yarn” tradition appears in “The Hairy Man” and its rhetoric aims to voice a sense of national identity. She also studies how Lawson's story revisits the oral past through a poetics grounded on the presence of vernacular language, on the manipulation of the plot, on the storyteller's know-how and on his audience's enjoyment. She also addresses the plastic and acoustic dimension of words in “The Curse” as an innovative piece of poetic prose, and underlines its modernist aesthetics based on the discrepancy between wording and voicing as well as on the vacuity and sense of loss that appears in the interplay of silences and voices.

13 The South Pacific appears as well in Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler's article, "Taking the Performance to the Page: Short Stories from the South Pacific" where she studies the written work of Maori author, Patricia Grace. Heuvel-Disler concentrates on Grace's use of story-telling techniques and themes that can be traced back to their culture's oral tradition of pre-contact times. Through a focus on a text fragment as an example of this type of literature, Heuvel-Disler demonstrates how the written word has become
instrumental to the storytelling event. She raises the question of who the actors in the event are and how this is reflected in language. Based on Michael Halliday’s framework of social semiotics, Frantz Fanon’s theory on the decolonizing role of the indigenous intellectual, and Walter Benjamin’s description of the storyteller, her paper develops the thesis that in the South Pacific, written texts that contain a substantial amount of traditional storytelling elements can be regarded as markers of cultural continuity.

Judith Misrahi-Barak examines orality and silence in “My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence…”, or The Vocalisation of Silence in Caribbean short-stories by Edwige Danticat.” She proposes to go beyond the association of orality in literature with the use of creole, or dialect which is particularly emphasized in the context of the Caribbean, to concentrate on what she calls the interface with the issues of voice and silence. According to Misrahi-Barak, the Haitian English-speaking writer, Edwige Danticat, in her two collections of short-stories, Krik ? Krak ! and The Dew Breaker,brings to the surface of the text the untold history that crushes people, and also uses silence as both a theme and a rhetorical tool. She observes the way Danticat’s written text makes the speaking voice or the silent voice heard, the way it is organized around voice and silence, and how it contributes to turning a narrative of oppression into a narrative of liberation.

Marie-Annick Montout demonstrates an interest in the Caribbean voice with her article, “The Intrinsic Written Quality of the Spoken Word in Olive Senior's Short Fiction.” Montout explores how Jamaican writer Olive Senior draws upon her daily life in Jamaica to infuse her short stories with the oral Jamaican language. She underlines how the characters and narrators in Senior’s stories, being members of the Jamaican community, are shown to be more apt at transmitting oral traditions and cultural habits inherited from the past. Montout also emphasizes the perfect web created by the author between two different ways of telling stories.

Timothy Weiss studies the tradition of orality from the perspective of the reader in his article, “Orality and the Reader: Cultural and Transcultural Elements in Achebe's Girls at War.” Weiss points out the rich tradition of orality in Chinua Achebe’s novels and short-story collections, and places particular emphasis on Girls at War (1972). His essay addresses the oral elements of two stories in the collection, “Uncle Ben's Choice” and “The Sacrificial Egg,” through an approach of reader-oriented and translational theories of interpretation. Weiss observes how fiction with a specific oral dimension is easier to understand, especially for second-language learners, perhaps because of the way in which orality stimulates the readers’ actualization and dramatization of the story. Nevertheless, he notes that orality does not necessarily facilitate reading because of the many kinds of information needed for readers to embody the voice that they hear (or hear it at all). Weiss’s essay attempts to identify the cultural and transcultural aspects of orality in a learner environment where readers do not know very much about the societies and cultures to which the stories refer.

Despite the different cultures, countries, and historical periods represented in these articles, they all set forth many common themes such as voice, silence, culture, and community, and are therefore suggestive of the far-reaching implications of orality in narrative. Laurent Lepaludier’s article will serve as a conceptual starting point for the reading of these papers which all endeavor to deepen our understanding of how the traditional tension between orality and the written word can take on a variety of forms in the literary text.
AUTHORS

MICHELLE RYAN-SAUTOUR
Co-organizers of the conference “Orality in Short Fiction” held in Angers, November 2005.

BENAOUDA LEBDAÏ
Co-organizers of the conference “Orality in Short Fiction” held in Angers, November 2005.

LAURENT LEPALUDIER
Director of the Research Center on the Short Story in English
Snugly sitting in my favourite armchair, I open the book and start reading. As my eyes follow the lines of signs, I hear a voice. Or rather, voices. The voices of the characters, but also what came to be called the narrative voice, which in fact is a sort of blending of my own mental voice – the voice I imagine I have as I hear myself –, and the voice of that other who addresses me. This time it is an unknown first person whose gender or age I cannot identify. At other times, it is the voice of a character I seem to know. Nevertheless, my own voice strangely blends with his or hers. Sometimes, a third person leaves ample room for my voice to take possession of the narrative. Sometimes it does not. All those voices, which are in fact thoughts, thread their way around the story, fight, combine, and relate. A victim of phonocentric and logocentric illusions, I fall prey to the deconstructing angel or devil who keeps telling me about my inept metaphysical bias. This time, I decide to think twice and inquire about this quasi-orality that we all find in narrative fiction. What is it exactly? What is this voice I am reading? Why should we oppose necessarily orality and literacy in literature, and worship the word, or the letter, demonising the other term in the dyad? Would it not be more interesting and fruitful to see how the two combine and relate dynamically? This is why I propose to focus first on the nature of orality itself, then see how it applies to literature, what forms it takes and what effects it produces. This should help approach the functions of written orality and evoke, in conclusion, the issue of orality and the literary canon.

Orality versus literacy

After Saussure, Walter Ong recalls the primacy of oral forms of language, that words are made of sounds, and that orality is the root of all verbalisation. The oral/aural field is very different from the visual field of literacy. Walter Ong’s book Orality and Literacy:
The Technologizing of the Word focuses on the psychodynamics of orality. Orality functions very differently from writing. Some of Ong's statements could be remembered:

1. the sounded word is power and action
2. orality is based on mnemonics and formulas
3. orality is additive rather than subordinative
4. it is aggregative rather than analytical
5. it is redundant
6. it is agonistically toned
7. it is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
8. it is homeostatic (focusing on relevance)
9. it is situational rather than abstract

Some of these statements will certainly call qualifications and discussions, but they have the merit of stressing the main general characteristics of orality. What remains to be seen is whether or how, or to what extent these characteristics are also true of written orality or how written orality dispenses with some of them and how it aims to retain certain characteristics for poetic or other purposes.

Some of Ong’s ideas are certainly controversial, for instance his statement about orality being by nature more conservative or traditionalist than writing, a point I shall come back to presently.

The dynamics of orality are contrasted with the dynamics of textuality. Clearly orality does not function like text since its actualisation is based on the moment. Textuality, achieved through a solipsistic operation tends to fictionalise the reader. It creates a distance from the message which encourages analysis since it allows backward scanning. It separates the subject of knowledge from its object, the knower from the known and precludes interaction. This is why it would be a gross mistake to believe, as Walter Ong states, that writing is by nature less conservative, for it does not allow the possibility to contradict or engage in a real dialogue with the author and thus precludes a true evolution of ideas resulting from an exchange of points of view and a direct interpersonal or collective debate (by direct I mean non-mediated through ulterior debates or articles for instance). The nature of addresses and dialogism differs in oral and written forms. Closure implies an impossibility to evolve except through interpretations. Orality is not by nature more persuasive than literacy. Very much depends on the genre used and the author or speaker. It would be relevant to study how persuasion works in a text using written orality.

Rather than oppose orality and literacy, it seems more rewarding to study how the written text re-enacts, transforms or plays with oral forms, what it keeps of orality, what it cannot use or what it discards. Strictly speaking, there is no orality whatsoever in a written text. The written text sometimes mimes orality. It creates the illusion of orality, a pretence which is the result of conventions. Thus, it should be called written orality or quasi-orality. Written orality is obviously a fabrication. It is not necessarily part of the reality effect as we know it in fiction. Indeed, it may also concern non-fictional texts which use quotation marks, for instance. However written orality certainly contributes to the reality effect in fiction since it places conversations in the present moment of reading. This certainly contributes to a certain extent to the power
of persuasion of written orality. But the forms and types of written orality vary a lot. Exploring some types of written orality is what I propose as the next task.

Types of written orality in narrative fiction

The most obvious type of written orality in fiction is direct speech in the form of conversation, dialogue, or monologue. By convention, direct speech will use quotation marks which imply that the words are exactly reported. This tends to abolish the time gap inherent in ulterior narration and gives the reader a sense of actuality. It is as though the reader were hearing the words as and when they are uttered. This brings the text closer to orality and gives a sense of immediacy. However what is lacking is the sound of the voice, the tone, the intonation, and all the gestures, attitudes and gazes which usually participate in the oral exchange. This is often compensated for by the indications given by the text which may point out a particular tone or the quality of the voice. Obviously, orality in the written text belongs to the order of mimesis: it is fabricated, composed, and distilled through time. The narrative sometimes dissociates the enunciation and the utterance, indicating what is said before or after specifications about the way it is said. This allows greater possibilities for analysis in a more conceptual way. What is felt but not necessarily verbalised in orality is expressed with words in the written text which thus shapes and directs the interpretation.

Some emphasis, but too little perhaps, has been put on the fact that direct speech in fiction is rarely what it is in oral exchanges. Direct speech in fiction is usually stylised, deprived of most redundancies, hesitations, verbal tics and other forms which characterise orality produced in the instant. This is true to the extent that the conversation or the monologue have acquired a particular status in fiction; they are conventional stylistic genres with their own rules. Direct speech nevertheless encodes characterisation, ideologies or social commentary while giving the reader a sense of being present to the scene through the power of imagination. The analysis of direct speech in narrative fiction is certainly a relevant starting-point of interpretation, however complex it may sometimes be due to the variety of characters or the absence of a simplistic ideological encoding or characterisation.

Speech is not always presented in a direct form. Indirect speech removes speech from what can be called the first degree orality of direct speech. It is speech once removed and produces echoes of the spoken words and of the voice which uttered them, with a certain distance and the predominant mark of another voice presenting it, controlling it, filtering it. Indirect speech is thus a form of double orality with one voice being foregrounded as a more present subject of enunciation and the other voice being backgrounded as the object of discourse, as the utterance or “énoncé”. Thus, in “Experiment” by Julian Barnes, the first-person narrator tells how his uncle Freddy provided three different versions of what happened to him in Paris, saying in a first version his activity was “Cire réaliste”, in the second version “Je suis, Sire, rallyist?” and in a third, improbable one that he was drinking Reuilly’s wine, “Je suis sur Reuillys”. The three versions further emphasise the distancing effect of indirect speech. The implications of the choice of discourse bear a significance on the poetics of narrative fiction, especially when used as a consistent strategy in short fiction. Free indirect speech (usefully distinguished by Anglo-Saxon criticism from free indirect thought) blurs the borders of the two enunciations. The double form of orality in free
indirect speech sometimes tends to create a voice which is a hybrid of the two voices of enunciation which lose their neat separate identities. Blurred vocal identities may suggest a questioning of the borders of self and identity: if voices can blend and turn into hybrid forms, one may question the unity of the speaking rational subject, an issue very much discussed by modernist writers for instance. The nature of written orality itself can also be questioned by the use of a voice seemingly without a definite origin or mixing with thoughts in an indefinable way as Virginia Woolf sometimes does: “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime. One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall.”

This discussion of the forms of speech inevitably leads us to examine the other form of written orality which is traditionally called the narrative voice. The oral aspect of the narrative voice is more or less overt. It tends to be more overt in first-person narratives than in third-person narratives. However the oral quality of the narrative depends essentially on intrinsic characteristics of orality mimed by the narration. In every story of the collection entitled Bloodline, Ernest Gaines lets the reader hear the voices of the South:

Go’n be coming in a few minutes. Coming round that bend down there full speed.
And I’m go’n get out my handkerchief and wave it down, and we go’n get on it and go.
I keep on looking for it, but, Mama don’t look that way no more. She’s looking down the road we just come from. It’s a long old road, and far’s you can see you don’t se nothing but gravel.

The reader will also be sensitive to the tone of a narrative voice. The tone, with its overtones and undertones is quasi-physical: it seems as though the reader can hear a narrator murmur, sing, complain, or chant, etc. The narrative voices of a Henry James, a D.H. Lawrence, a Virginia Woolf, an Ernest Gaines, an Olive Senior sound very different. The sound of the narrative voice varies considerably. A narrative voice may be particularly marked by orality as in Ernest Gaines’s stories. The voice sometimes rings with assonances or alliterations. It may be endowed with musicality as in “The String Quartet” by Virginia Woolf:

Flourish, spring, burgeon, burst! The pear tree on the top of the mountain.
Fountains jet; drops descend. But the waters of the Rhone flow swift and deep, race under the arches, and sweep the railing water leaves, washing shadows over the silver fish, the spotted fish rushed down by the swift waters, now swept into an eddy where – it’s difficult this – conglomeration of fish all in a pool; leaping, splashing, scraping sharp fins; and such a boil of current that the yellow pebbles are churned round and round, round and round – free now, rushing downwards, and even somehow ascending in exquisite spirals into the air; curled like thin shavings from under a plane; up and up...

In some cases, as we have seen, the narrative may mime everyday speech, but in others it comes close to poetry or music. It may sound with rhythmical effects. A strong orality effect will make the reader more aware of the presence of a speaking subject, and consequently of the subjectivity of discourse. This is true of some XIXth century stories where oratory was of prime value. On the contrary, other voices sometimes fade into the background to become self-effaced and so create an impression of objectivity as in Ernest Hemingway’s stories.

But the quasi-physical tone of the narrative voice may also ring with moral judgements, express a particular stance: thus satire, irony, or humour can be heard so to speak.
Indeed what is usually called the tone of a narrative in literary circles cannot be neatly separated from the impression of a quasi-physical tone of voice. Thus, the irony in the opening of “Mr. Reginald Peacock’s Day” by Katherine Mansfield can be heard through the rhythms, repetitions, emphases, exclamations of a narrative voice mixing with the thoughts of Reginald Peacock in internal focalisation:

If there was one thing that he hated more than another it was the way she had of waking him in the morning. She did it on purpose, of course. It was her way of establishing her grievance for the day, and he was not going to let her know how successful it was. But really, really, to wake a sensitive person like that was positively dangerous! It took him hours to get over it – simply hours. She came into the room buttoned up in an overall, with a handkerchief over her head – thereby proving that she had been up herself and slaving since dawn – and called in a low, warning voice: “Reginald!”

Written orality depends on the genre of the text. Some short stories take after the traditional tale. This occurs frequently in new literatures such as African or Caribbean literatures, which often plunge their roots in ethnotexts: traditional tales, myths, plays or songs. The short story provides a fitting form to these texts because of its brevity. The narrative voice often rings with a strong oral quality because it follows the patterns, rhythms or formulas of the original oral form. Written orality comes as close as possible to the tone of the traditional story-teller’s voice. The gap between written culture and oral culture is thus narrowed and the way the written narrative mimics, recycles or departs from the oral form constitutes a treasure of studies for the critic. This orientation is not specific to new literatures and many examples can be found in European or American literatures (as will be demonstrated in the following articles).

Written literature does not just copy “orature” or “oralitude” to employ the terms coined by Claude Hagège. It cannot be content with being a mere transcription of oral narratives. If the task of putting oral tales or myths on paper or in electronic form is essential for the conservation of the living or sometimes half-forgotten treasures of oral cultures, literature usually aims at relating with these oral forms. An interesting object of study is the way the “speakerly text”, to use Henry Louis Gates’s terms”, or Edouard Glissant’s “oraliture” manages, organises, and relates with these oral forms: transformations, distortions, mises en abyme, distancing effects need to be analysed in order to understand the stance of the text as regards oral culture and forms.

These forms of written orality, and many others which the following articles will identify and study, adapted from real speech and transmogrified by textuality, serve a great number of functions in literature.

**Functions of written orality in literature**

One function of written orality may be memorial. In the case of ethnotexts, for instance in new literatures, the written text is a way to keep and protect oral tales. It is a way to make sure they do not disappear or are not transformed substantially as they are passed on from generation to generation. It is in this spirit that the likes of the Brothers Grimm or Croker collected traditional tales in the past. However, if we consider oral cultures as very capable of transmitting oral tales and keeping them alive and thriving while allowing them to evolve with the needs and problems of changing societies, one may feel such a task is useless in relation to literature. In the present world, the gap between orality and textuality has narrowed. An incessant dialogue
between the mass media in both oral and written forms has taken place: the radio, cinema, television, the internet and advertisements mix text and image with sounds and spoken words. Oral and written forms also react upon each other: there are articles about songs or speeches as there are talk shows about novels. In this new context of interrelated media, the relations between orality and textuality have become much more varied and complex than in the past. There are also new ways of recording oral tales. New technologies can very well perform the memorial function once expected from the written text. What literature can do is develop particular relationships with orality through written orality and it is these particular ways of dealing with orality that, in my opinion, deserve the critic’s attention.

Quasi-orality in a text may be used to create a mimetic effect. The aim of written orality may be the representation of speech as uttered by characters belonging to a certain national or local background, a particular social class and a specific period. The writer may be after an authenticity, which he or she may think more safely achieved through direct speech (as in “Ballad” by Olive Senior) or through a narrative told in a simple style (as in many of Ernest Gaines’s short stories). But it would be erroneous to overestimate and generalise the importance of the mimetic function of written orality, for literary texts may have other purposes.

Written orality has obvious narrative functions. The place of orality in the management of the narrative, in dramatisation, in the plot, in character-drawing, etc. is essential and will be scrutinised in the following papers.

This is congruent with the aesthetic function of written orality. In literature – and perhaps more particularly in the short story because the brevity of the form and its aesthetic concerns focus the reader’s attention on formal details and structures –, written orality constitutes a certain mode of beauty characteristic of specific aesthetic orientations. Realist stories, for instance, will emphasise a closeness to words as they are produced in the vernacular language: idiolects, sociolects, abbreviations, distortions will be used in order to make the reader experience a closeness with ordinary characters of a certain period or milieu. On the other hand, stories influenced by myth or romance will follow the patterns of a certain genre or a particular poetic diction which will present the characters as more remote and universal figures. Modernist stories, such as Katherine Mansfield’s for instance, will underline the presence of the unconscious in words that may seem trivial. To each aesthetic, a way of representing orality. Orality can also be endowed with figural power in the way it uses the cliché, the metaphor, double-entendre, the pun or rhythmic effects for instance.

Written orality may also serve cultural functions. A short story may integrate or imitate oral traditions to give them a new shape through the written text or make a stance in defence of a threatened oral culture. Written orality can sometimes embody a search for origins answering the cultural needs of a certain type of society, as in Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories: Kipling based some of his stories on traditional oral African tales in a spirit of primitivism with a post-darwinian touch. In a post-modern context, written orality can also cristallise the banal in the meaningless life of the characters and typify contemporary post-industrial culture.

Written orality is bound up with the political and the ideological. The representation of orality in fiction may correspond to a desire to oppose classes through their sociolects, contrast the languages of an oppressed section of the population with the dominant classes, using satirical, humouristic or ironic modes. Written orality has often served
militant purposes in defence of various causes. Less obvious involvement with the political or the ideological can be traced in the use of written orality. A writer’s choice of a certain type of narrative voice or of certain forms of discourse may reflect a political or ideological unconscious. For instance the slavish reproduction of the convention of bourgeois dialogues or the blindly stereotyped rendering of a woman’s supposed ways of talking and interests will reflect an unconscious bourgeois conception or a patriarchal frame of mind.

Such functions and effects of written orality cannot be separated from the more general framework of each story, its perspective, its tone, and other aesthetic aspects to which it necessarily relates.

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I do not pretend to have brought sufficiently developed and illustrated arguments about written orality in the short story. My purpose was to set the stage for a number of questions and issues related to written orality, knowing that the following papers will debate some of them but also examine others, avoiding the traps of speech-worship or text-worship. What can be debated is the literary value of written orality in the short story; the value of oral genres such as the myth, the legend, the tale, sometimes considered in the past as inferior genres because they were oral; or the question of the creative or conservative influence of orality in a literary text.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


ABSTRACTS


AUTHOR

LAURENT LEPALUDIER

Laurent Lepaludier, agrégation and Doctorat d’Etat, is a professor of English at the University of Angers where he teaches British literature and critical theory. He has written a thesis on Joseph Conrad. Head of the CRILA research centre of Angers, and in charge of the research on the short story, he is also head of the English section of the CERPECA (the Canadian studies research centre of Angers). He has published articles on XIXth and XXth century British novels and short stories, on Canadian short stories, and a book entitled L’Objet et le récit de fiction (P.U. Rennes). A book entitled L’Image autrement: le visuel dans la nouvelle moderniste de langue anglaise will soon be published. His research currently focuses on fiction and knowledge and on the poetics of narrative fiction.
In romance as we read and as we hear in geste written orality in the medieval “Short story” : the verse romances of the 13th & 14th centuries

John Ford

I. Introduction

While the Middle English verse romance is not usually thought of as a short story in the contemporary sense of the term, consideration of this narrative form is appropriate for several reasons when examining the use of orality in short fiction. Judging from a strictly historical perspective, the verse romances are directly linked with the medieval French nouvelles, which are themselves considered early forerunners of the short story. In fact, as the very title of this conference demonstrates, the term nouvelle is still retained in French as the translation for the genre known as “short fiction” in English, and indeed, the French equivalent of the English verse romance is also frequently referred to as a nouvelle. In practical terms, the verse romance also stood in relation to the medieval epics and chronicles in much the same way that the modern short story stands in relation to the novel: it is shorter, more concise, and one should be able to get through it easily in one sitting. Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, the Middle English verse romances were composed at a time when English was re-establishing itself as a suitable language for serious literary composition after being supplanted in this role for several centuries by French and Latin. Within a generation of the Norman Conquest, English had largely ceased to be used for such purposes, though English-speaking scops, bards and minstrels continued to elaborate old tales and develop new ones in memorized recitations before various audiences. It furthermore appears that most of the extant verse romances must have circulated orally in some form for a considerable time before being preserved in writing. It is therefore not surprising to find so many vestiges of the oral tradition in the verse romances, and an examination
of these traces might prove especially useful to anyone studying the development of written literature from traditional oral sources in many cultures today.

Before examining these traces, however, it is important to explain precisely what aspects of orality are to be treated here. This is necessary because the conception of the term in respect to modern works is, in many ways, wholly inapplicable to the verse romances. As a result, the tack taken in considering orality in this paper will differ to some extent from that of many other papers here included. We shall first briefly explain the most usual understanding of orality and the way it is studied in modern literature, then show how this differs from the conception of orality in treating medieval literature, and finally show the evidence for orality in written form of the Middle English verse romances composed from the late 12th to the early 14th centuries.

In considering modern works, orality is most often understood as the use of dialect language to portray the actual speech-ways of characters in modern fiction. In such cases, the means of representing the relevant speech-ways is usually achieved in one of two ways. First, an author might employ non-standard or dialectical English words, sometimes with “conventional” phonetic spellings and abbreviations, while generally continuing to utilize standard written English. This means of representing accent and dialect is so common that it is often found in fiction not intended to represent actual speech variations in any meaningful way. Although this method has the advantage of not proving too distracting to readers accustomed to standard orthography, it has the disadvantage of being limited in its effective portrayal of speech-ways. A second method is to use non-standard grammar and syntax to represent a particular dialect, often accompanied by innovative spelling to transliterate the pronunciation of a corresponding accent. While this approach can be effectively used to represent a particular accent or dialect with a considerable degree of accuracy, it has the disadvantage of often proving distracting to the reader. Frequently, even readers who speak the dialect represented might complain of difficulty reading such texts, accustomed as they are to standard orthography for all sorts of speech. This is especially true of works written entirely in “dialect,” an increasingly common practice used most notably by some contemporary Scottish writers. In such cases, however, regularization of the non-standard spellings, grammar and syntax throughout a given work eventually prove increasingly less troublesome as the reader becomes accustomed to them. Regardless of which method is preferred, in these instances orality is conceived of as an attempt on the part of the writer to represent a speech-way that differs from the received linguistic standards in respect to grammar, syntax and pronunciation by employing non-standard written English.

While such aspects of orality are well worth considering, they are outwith the focus of this paper because the language used in the medieval verse romances is almost invariably a transliteration of actual speech-ways of various Middle English accents and dialectics. This is because the English language was no longer standardized on the Old English West Saxon model when the romances were written, and it hadn’t yet become fully standardized on the South Midland’s accent and dialect of London. Since there was no prescribed linguistic standard, there was no possibility of employing non-standard language. Writers naturally wrote as they spoke, and until roughly the middle of the 16th century, phonetic spelling that reflected regional speech-ways was considered normal. As such, all of the romances reflect the author’s own dialect and accent to a greater or lesser extent; there was never a conscious attempt to vary the
language in order to “infuse” it with an oral characteristic because this particular aspect of orality was invariably present in every act of writing.

The focus of this paper is therefore not so much the reproduction of accent or dialect in the Middle English verse romances, but rather the retention of narrative structures and turns of speech characteristic of oral recitation in the tales’ written form. Of particular interest is the continued use of exhortative and occasionally emphatic discourse and direct address between a first-person narrator and a second-person audience in an otherwise third-person narrative. In a strictly oral composition with no cover to open for a beginning, no cover to shut for an end, and no chapter headings for dividing episodes, any work of significant length needs such stylised direct intercourse between a narrator and the audience in order to regulate the narrative flow. In the written medium, however, visual cues on the page can do the work of such oral “tags,” as is clearly seen in modern narratives with their reliance on titles, chapter headings, even paragraph breaks and punctuation. Nevertheless, these tags were retained as conventional elements of the verse romances long after the written medium made them obsolete. This is because tradition had made them a customary aspect of narratives, much as “Once upon a time” and “They lived happily ever after” remain customary – albeit non-essential – “bookends” to open and close a traditional fairy tale. While a greater degree of variation is permitted in the verse romances, their beginnings and endings are similarly formulaic. Both draw on oral tags that would have originally been used by scops and bards to alert their audiences to the start and finish of a recitation. The beginning, sometimes prefaced by a prayerful invocation, is indicated by an exhortative opening naming the audience addressed; the ending typically consists of a prayerful closing which might exhort the deity, the audience or both. Between these bookends, oral tags also frequently appear in the form of signposting digressions that signal episodic divisions in the narrative by directing the audience’s attention to a turn in development. Taken together, the bookends (consisting of exhortative openings and prayerful closing) and the signposting digressions can be thought of as opening titles, chapter headings and conclusive endings. The remainder of this paper shall examine each of these three elements in turn.

II. Exhortative Openings

Invocations & Call to Listen

In antiquity, it was customary to begin verse narratives by invoking the muse, asking her to give the poet the ability to tell his or her story. Homer uses such a beginning in his Iliad and Odyssey, as does Virgil in his Aeneid. While such invocations of the muse are not entirely characteristic of the verse romances as a genre, many of them do begin with a prayer to God, Christ or the Holy Trinity. Examples can be found in a significant number of the romances, including Athelston’s Sir Eglamour of Artois, and the Earl of Toulouse, each of which begins with a six-line invocatory prayer. Other romances beginning with similar invocations of various lengths include the Avowyng of Arthur, Amis and Amiloun, Ywain and Gawain and the Sultan of Babylon. Although considered more characteristic of romance endings than beginnings (for almost all romances close with
an invocation while only about a quarter begin with one), such dedications might nevertheless represent a continuation with early traditions.

7 After such prayerful recourse, however, the poems then generally turn to what is considered the most typical romance introduction, the exhortative opening. Much as the name suggests, the author/narrator calls upon his audience to perform a particular action, namely to hear a tale. As shall be seen in numerous examples cited below, the exhortation usually begins “Hearken!” (e.g., Havelok the Dane, 1) or “Listen!” (e.g., Athelston, 7) both of which, incidentally, are often given as translations for the “Hwæt!” that opens so many Old English poems (e.g., Beowulf and The Dream of the Rood). While such an exhortation might therefore be thought of as showing a lingering influence of the Old English tradition, it is probably more accurate to say that it is characteristic of medieval tradition in general, appearing as it does in romances and their antecedents in other European languages as well.

**Naming the Audience**

8 The exhortations also generally identify a target audience. Given the range of targets named, it seems probable that such naming was sometimes simply a respect of convention rather than a real indication of the tales’ expected recipients. This seems especially true when the romances are addressed to the high nobility or royalty. For example, Robert of Sicily begins: “Princes proud...” but finishes the line with: “...that be in press” (1); in other words: “among the throng”12. It is not likely that true princes would feel themselves so crowed into the masses, though, and given the fondness for these particular formulaic constructions throughout the poem, we can assume it is meant as hyperbolic courtesy rather than an actual address to princes. The Earl of Toulouse, on the other hand, is addressed to “Dear Lords” (7). As today, such styling would be appropriate for all levels of the aristocracy, but given the existence of other terms of address for the lower ranks, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century it may have been considered particularly suited to the high nobility. As such, it again seems that this term of address would have been more courteous than accurate, for it is believed the romances in English would have appealed more to an emerging gentry or lesser nobility than to the established French-speaking aristocracy14. It is therefore perhaps not surprising to see so few romances generically addressed directly to kings, princes or lords.

9 More common still, however, are appeals to Lordings, an obsolete diminutive properly referring to a young lord or the son of a lord. It also seems to have been particularly suitable for the lesser nobility or gentry, but when used in the plural (as here) it is most often simply a way of saying “Sirs,” or “My Masters.” It is thus perhaps best thought of as a medieval equivalent of the modern “[Ladies and] Gentlemen.” This seems to be the signification of its use in numerous romances, including Sir Orfeo (“But hearken, Lordings, that be true”; 23)15, Sir Cleges (“Listen, Lordings, and you shall hear”; 1)16, and Athelston (Listen, Lordings, that be hende”; 7)17. Just to underscore the point, the same title of address occurs in Sir Degaré (1)18, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle (1)19, and Bevis of Hampton (1)20. Although this list of occurrences is far from exhaustive, it seems that in all such cases the audience is more accurately identified; it is therefore not terribly surprising that there are more romances addressed to this segment of society than there are of those addressed to the higher nobility, or indeed, any other social group.
It likewise appears to be the case that the lesser nobility or gentry are indicated when certain genteel adjectives are provided in place of titles. *The Siege of Milan* for example, is addressed simply to: “All worthy men” (1). In order to be worthy, however, one would have to have not only a certain social standing, but also a certain bearing appropriate to that status. The adjective *worthy* was frequently found in conjunction with the titles *lord*, *lady*, *lording* and *gentleman*, and it can be assumed that its usage without a specific title makes an indirect reference to individuals of such degree. A similar term that is frequently found in the romances is: *hende*; though obsolete today, it was a very common Middle English masculine adjective that embraced a range of meanings, including: “noble,” “gracious,” “worthy,” “courteous” and even “handsome.” While social custom dictated that a peasant or yeoman could not be *hende* no matter how well-mannered he might be, the term could be correctly applied to any man with at least the rank of a gentleman so long as his demeanour proved him to be well-bred (though by implication, perhaps not the most well-born). It thus again seems to be the lesser nobility and gentry who are addressed in numerous tales using these adjectives in their opening address, including *Amis and Amiloun* (“All that be *hende*, hearken to me”; 2), and *Sir Isumbras* (“*Hende* in hall, you will hear of elders that were before us”; 1-2). Again, such usage would accord well with what is known to have been the probable audience of the Middle English verse romances.

Still other romances use even more familiar terms of address. *Sir Perceval of Galles* is addressed simply to “Friends” or “My Dears” (1). While still courteous, this style of address indicates a social parity between the compositor and his probable audience. The author of *Sir Eglamour* likewise keeps the familiar tone but dispenses with formal courtesies by addressing the story to an unqualified “you” (7). *King Horn* also has a simple “you,” saying anyone who listens to his song will be “blithe” (1-3). *Gamelyn* is likewise addressed simply to “you” (2), and is furthermore an interesting tale because the hero is of neither royal nor noble blood, but is a member of the “country squire” level of gentry or lesser nobility. In this case, the compositor’s use of “you” seems to underscore both his parity with the audience and, presumably, their mutual parity with the eponymous hero of the tale. Again, given what we know about the probable composition of the romance audience, this is actually quite appropriate.

It seems that the author of this late romance (after 1350) saw no reason to flatter his readers or listeners with distinguished titles or epithets, and in recognition of the respectability of their station, even provides them with a hero from their own class. *Havelok*, however, a tale in which the hero is indeed a royal prince, strays in the other direction in being addressed to somewhat baser stock. The tale begins: “Hearken to me goodmen, [good]wives, maidens and all men” (1-2). The term *goodman* is, like *lording*, an archaism. It was a term of civility roughly equivalent to “mister,” probably most commonly used to refer to respectable householders with a bit of land who, though somewhat better off than the local peasantry, did not quite measure up in wealth or status to a lording or gentleman. Similarly, a *goodwife* was a female of equal status to the goodman, be she married to him or not. Next, although *maiden* could refer to any unmarried young woman, the term tended to be reserved for those of life’s lower stations. Similarly, when unqualified by a prefixed *noble*, *gentle*, or *good*, the term *man* used by itself tended to connote those of humbler origins, just as the term *wife* did for women. Thus, *Havelok* appears to be directed unequivocally to *hoi polloi*, an address
which was as mocking to the probable “middling sort” who constituted the bulk of the audience as Robert of Sicily’s princely style was flattering. In all likelihood this fall in status of the addressee probably doesn’t indicate an actual shift in the audiences’ composition, but rather a higher degree of literate involvement in the composition. Instead of flattering their audiences, the latter variations use the conventional exhortations to mock them. The possibility of this happening is much more likely through the written medium. This is because so long as the exhortations served a real heraldic purpose in calling an audience to hear a story delivered orally from memory, a measure of respect would be required. In such cases not only would it be acceptable for the performer to adapt the narrative to suit the audience, but expected, and such adaptations would be particularly anticipated in the exhortative opening address. To provide a disrespectful address in such a situation would risk having it taken in earnest rather than laughed off as a joke. Only with the advent of the written delivery – or an oral delivery drawn directly from a scrupulously followed written script – can the performer escape responsibility for the slight by blaming it on a text written to a generic audience. Modern authors, playwrights and scriptwriters for television and film are frequently able to turn this situation to comic effect in occasional jibes to the audience that are found to be humorous rather than insulting because it is patently obvious that they are indeed generic and not designed specifically for any particular audience. It seems the use of writing permitted the composers of the verse romances to achieve a similar effect; but what is most interesting here is that they have retained a conventional element that was initially necessary in the oral environment and have adapted it to a new purpose in their written accounts where the original function is no longer needed.

**Oral Announcements in Written Forms**

Another obvious aspect of orality contained the exhortations is the announcement that the tale is to be delivered aloud. As the vast majority of the above examples demonstrate, the audience is usually requested to listen, hearken or hear. Authors also frequently write that they will “tell” the tale (e.g., *Athelston*, 10; *Havelok*, 3; etc.) or “sing” it (e.g., *Horn*, 2-3; *Bevis of Hampton*, 3, etc.). The versifiers sometimes even request the audience to “take heed” (*Earl of Toulouse*, 11), or “hold your tongue!” (*Gamelyn*, 169), presumably in order to hear better. These pronouncements evidently evolved from the pleas of minstrels and bards for silence before reciting tales in crowded halls in the days when oral delivery was the norm. Evidence to support such a link with the bardic tradition is not hard to find in the romances themselves. *Emaré*, for example, begins by talking of wandering minstrels:

> Minstrels that walk far and wide,
> Here and there in every a side,
> In many a diverse land,
> Should, at their begining,
> Speak of that upstanding king (1-5).

Likewise, one can almost hear the voice of the bard in the opening lines of *Amis and Amiloun*, when the narrative voice alludes to the task of weaving the heroes’ names into its rhymes:
The children's names, I promise you,  
I will work correctly into rhyme  
And tell in my discourse (37-39)

While statements such as these do indeed suggest a link with an earlier oral tradition, that does not detract from the fact that all of the surviving tales are the product of a literate society. The very plot of *Athelston*, for example, hangs on deceit practiced through letter writing, and its four main protagonists meet in their youth while serving as letter-carrying messengers. Not only that, but throughout the narrative the author maintains that the source for his story was found “written in a book” (21), a claim that has actually sent scholars hunting for a written source. Even *King Horn*, arguably the oldest romance, refers to writing at least three times (938, 939, 1011). Furthermore, while it is likely that some of the stories were occasionally recited or performed, it is equally probable that they were frequently the focus of more solitary reading. Thus, as with the mocking forms of address, it stands to reason that romance writers did not intend their exhortations to be taken literally, but rather that they had simply become a traditional way for introducing a story.

Further evidence for this point of view comes from the frequent allusions in the romances themselves to their being found in writing. The maker of *Sir Launfal*, for example, acknowledges that the tale is found “in romance as we read” (741). The identical expression is found in numerous other romances, including *Sir Isumbras* (759), the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (2636), and *Athelston*, where it occurs at least four times (383, 569, 623, 779). In *Amis and Amiloun* it occurs twice (27, 2448), but this tale also has four variations of the formula: “In geste as we so read” (144), “In book as we so read” (447), “It is a great sorrow to read in geste” (1546), and “Thus in geste we read” (1729). Additional variants occur in *Sir Isumbras* (501), *Horn Childe and Maiden Rinnild* (1119), *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (51), and *Sir Gowther* (470, 543); and this list is far from exhaustive. In fact, references to reading or finding information in romances or in gestes are so common that they are considered indispensable items in the inventory of common romance formulae, and this particular formula (including its variants) is one of the most common. But since the romances evidently do live up to their claims of being written, then their claims of being told and sung must be taken with a grain of salt. It is again likely that such references are simply vestiges of a time when minstrels did sing the tales, and the turns of phrase became so intricately linked with the genre that the oral tags were kept long after the shift from orality to writing. Indeed, it even seems probable that the numerous formulae referring to writing – clear indications that the romances as we have them were the product of a literate culture – originated as variations of these oral tags.

Evidence for the shift from the oral to the written tradition can actually be found in some romances that refer to both in the same lines. *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, for example, both begin: “We read often and find written, as clerks well know, the lays that were sung to the harp” (1-3). What is even more interesting is the apparent fact that being found in writing is what makes the tales “official.” To paraphrase *Ywain and Gawain*, “by writing words down, men make the stories true and stable” (37). This gives the clear impression that a narrative needs to exist in writing if it is to be considered creditable. It is the written form that gives it “auctorité,” the legitimate authority to be considered a real tale, and not simply a fanciful hearsay of the presenter. However, despite the claims of *Athelston* and some other romances to a written source, the numerous nods to orality couched in them make it certain that the
ultimate source of these tales and the genre itself is undoubtedly dependent to some extent on the oral tradition.

**III. Signposting**

20 Now as many of the above examples demonstrate, not all mention of listening or hearing appears at the beginning of a tale. Often enough, the audience is also directly addressed elsewhere in the narrative, particularly when the author wants to recap one episode before beginning a new one. Again, such a convention would be especially important in oral deliveries where the audience only has recourse to the spoken word for digesting and regulating the narrative. As we have mentioned, in the written medium such signalling is largely superfluous; thus, the fact that oral tags are retained in the verse romances is indicative of the influence of the oral tradition on this genre of written literature. The tale of *Amis and Amiloun* serves as a good example of this technique in practice. In addition to oral tags at the story’s opening, there are numerous points where the narrator addresses the audience as “you” or delivers an imperative. These tags can take various forms, but, as the following examples demonstrate, their formulaic character and their regulatory function in turning from one episode to another make them easily recognizable.

21 The first example is the turn from the one-line invocatory prayer to the beginning of the narrative proper with the announcement: “All that be hende, hearken to me / I pray you, *par amour*” (2-3). The next 20 lines, corresponding to the rest of the first stanza and all but the last line of the second, provide a very general overview of the story to be recounted. This description functions very much like the blurb found on the back of a paperback. It gives just enough detail to whet the audience’s interest without giving away the whole story. It says that the tale is one about two aristocratic youths born overseas, that they become friends as children while serving in a court, and that they are eventually knighted and swear lifelong friendship. The hook is the mention that theirs is a story of joy and great sorrow, the details of which are to follow. It is at that point, just before the narrator launches into the first episode, that the second exhortation comes: “Hearken, and you may here!” (24).

22 The following section then recounts how the youths are born in Lombardy on the same day, how they are identical though unrelated, and how at the age of eight they both end up living in the court of a powerful duke who agrees to ensure their education and eventually to knight them. Much stress is laid on the nobility of their appearance and character, the great love that the duke has for them and the goodwill they receive from all and sundry – details that will later lead to jealousy and their woe. Also emphasized is the remarkable bond of friendship between the two and the vow of brotherhood they swear to each other – a pact of true friendship that will ultimately prove the source of their salvation. Once this section is completed the narrator is able to open the next, which is done by again addressing the audience in the first line of the fourteenth stanza, with: “Thus in geste as you may here”(157). It is at this point that the narrator goes into the second part of the heroes’ lives, telling how they are knighted at fifteen and given offices in the duke’s court.

23 In this second section, we learn of the animosity the duke’s chief butler bears Amis and Amiloun due to their general popularity but most especially because of the duke’s love for them. As soon as it is established that he is forever plotting their downfall, news
arrives that Sir Amiloun’s parent have died and that he must return to his own lands to take up his inheritance. Much is made over the strain the pair feel over their imminent separation, for Sir Amis must remain behind because the duke cannot bear to part with them both. However, Amis is allowed to accompany his friend until evening on the first day of his journey, and as they set out for the ride the episode ends with: “Hende, hearken, it cannot be denied: They were such doughty knights who rode out of town in that moment” (280-82).24

The next exhortation is particularly noteworthy because it is a unique turn of phrase created specifically for this narrative. After riding out for most of the day, the heroes stop, descend from their horses, and with much weeping renew their vows of eternal and exclusive friendship, symbolized by an exchange of the identical golden cups. Amiloun rides off and it is said that he took control of his homeland and married a lovely maiden. Then, at the beginning of the 28th stanza, the narrator signals a change of direction in the plot by stating: “Now let us leave Amiloun alone with his wife in his country, God grant that he fare well, and we shall talk of Amis” (337-40).25 After this point there is no more mention of Amiloun for several hundred lines, the narrative focusing exclusively on Amis and his tribulations in the court. What is interesting, however, is that this turn in direction is signposted by a construction that bears the imprint of both the written and the oral tradition. By using an original and unique turn of phrase, the author avoids using one of the traditional formulae drawn from the fund of stock phrases that are usually found at such turning points. This is highly characteristic of the written tradition where authors have time to think about exactly what they want to say and tailor it to the needs of their particular narrative. However, although the turn of phrase selected is not a commonplace formula with the usual mnemonic usefulness, it remains characteristically oral in the direct address of the narrative voice to the audience.

Most turns, however, do tend to use formulaic tags. When there is a shift in scene from Sir Amis wandering in the garden to the sickbed of the duke’s daughter, it is signalled at the beginning of stanza 42 by the formula: “Now, hende, hearken, and you may here how [it was] that the duke’s dear daughter lay sick in her bed” (517-19). This same formula is later used at the beginning of stanza 100 when Sir Amiloun returns to the duke’s court to battle the steward in place of his friend: “Now, hende, hearken, and I shall say how [it was] that Sir Amiloun went his way” (1189-90). Likewise, the familiar tag “In geste as you may here” is used two more times, once at line 1917, when the leprous Amiloun’s servant Amoraunt is seen at Amis’s court, and once at 2355, when Amis enters a chapel to pray for guidance in the dilemma of trading his children’s lives for that of his friend. Not surprisingly, variations are numerous. “So in a time, as we tell in geste” is used at the beginning of stanza 33 when introducing a feast scene (411). Stanza 126 introduces Amis’s return to the duke’s court after a period of hiding with: “All thus, in geste as we say” (1501). Stanza 128 ends a description of Amis’s rise in fortune by saying: “In geste as it is told,” right before turning to describe how Amiloun contracts leprosy and enters a period of decline (1536). In some instances this particular formula is even adapted to incorporate the act of reading. The variation “In geste as so we read” occurs at the end of the twelfth stanza when turning from a description of the young heroes to their mutual pledge of fidelity (144). Other tags to end descriptions include “As each one of you have heard” (2484) to close an episode at the end of stanza 207, and the ambiguous: “In geste as we find” (2196) at the end of stanza 183. Many other examples exist as well, but in all cases an essentially oral tag...
has been retained in a written version of the tales where it continues to serve as a
signpost to the audience.

26 Perhaps what is most interesting is not only that these tags have been retained, but
that they have remained an integral part of the narrative form. They are expected
elements whose omission would be more disconcerting to a medieval audience than
their seemingly superfluous presence. Furthermore, it is striking how well they are
integrated into the written tradition. We have earlier said that the signposting function
of these formulaic oral tags could easily be met by the *mise-en-page*, such as paragraph
breaks or chapter headings. Such visual cues are indeed present in *Amis and Amiloun*,
one of the twelve-line tale-rhyme poems whose individual stanzas are clearly
delineated on the page by a line break after every 12 lines. As will be noted in the
examples cited above, the tags tend to fall either at the very end or the very beginning
of a stanza. This phenomenon is not limited to *Amis and Amiloun*. In *Gamelyn*, repetition
of the exhortative opening, “List and listen and hearken” (with some variants) has led
to the traditional division of the poem into six *fitts*, each focusing on a different
episode. These separate *fitts* are usually indicated by the *mise-en-page* in modern
editions, but such divisions are not so divided in the manuscript. In this case, not only
has the regulatory function of the traditionally oral tag been retained in the narrative,
but it has even informed the printed versions produced for a modern audience more at
ease with the written tradition.

27 It is important to emphasize that such patterns are not limited to these two tales, but
that they are characteristic of the verse romances as whole. As the examples have
shown, these tags can terminate one episode, open another, or even do both at the
same time. The most common tags are those whose formulaic quality lend them a
mnemonic facility and situational versatility that allows them to be used in a variety of
circumstances, but highly idiosyncratic constructions can also be adapted to serve the
specific needs of a particular romance, or even an particular episode in a romance. In
all cases, however, the tags signal a turn in the narrative, and it seems that even those
which are peculiar to a certain romance or situation function in a similar way to those
that are highly formulaic and exceedingly versatile. They help to direct the narrative
flow and regulate its course, much as the original tags from which they derive did in
the orally circulating tales from which the verse romances developed.

IV. Prayerful Closing

28 Seeing that elements of orality are present in the beginning of the romances and all
along their unfolding, it is hardly surprising to find that they also play a role in the
tales’ endings. This traditionally takes the form of a closing prayer, reminiscent of the
invocatory message found at the opening of some romances. However, although such
invocations to the deity only sometimes begin a romance, the end of a tale is almost
always signalled by a closing prayer. And while these prayers do share common
characteristics and serve a common function, their individual structure and precise
aims can and do vary, as the following examples shall demonstrate.

29 Frequently, the narrator cleverly intertwines the prayer with events in the story. *The
Squire of Low Degree*, for example, ends by recounting the return of noble companions to
their homelands, the marriage of the hero to his beloved, their happiness in their
subsequent long reign, and presumably their dignified death, for the romance
concludes: “In all my wanderings I never saw two other such lovers: therefore blessed may their souls be, amen, amen, for charity!” (1128-30)⁶⁶. *Amis and Amiloun* varies the ending by having the heroes renounce their wives and their lands before going on a pilgrimage and finally founding an abbey in their homeland. Nevertheless, the final prayer is still neatly tied into their story, for they are said to have died on the same day, to have been buried together, and then: “for their truth and goodness, the bliss of heaven they have as a reward, which lasts forevermore” (2506-8)⁶⁷. Both of these examples show the common custom of concluding the tale on a happy note for the protagonists – essentially the medieval equivalent of the modern fairy tale’s “happily ever after.”

While such a blessing on the central characters is fairly common, there are also instances where the prayer is either a curse or an invocation for divine punishment. The first nine lines of the last stanza of *Athelston*, for example, recount the gruesome execution of the Earl of Dover for treason. After being dragged through the streets of London by five horses he is hanged in a conspicuous spot where his body is left to rot unburied. Then the final three lines of this stanza – and thus the closing lines of the poem – read: “Now Jesus, that is heaven’s king, never let a traitor a better ending, but [give] such a judgment for death” (810-11)⁶⁸. Although a petition for punishment as opposed to an extolment for reward, such a request still conforms to the general pattern of the final prayer being an acknowledgment of the divine judgment meted out to characters of the story.

Elsewhere, however, the prayer was simply an entreaty for a universal blessing entirely unrelated to the events of the story. *King Horn*, for example, ends: “Jesus, that is heaven’s king, may he give us all his sweet blessing” (1543-44)⁶⁹. *Emaré* concludes: “Jesus, sitting in your throne, grant that we might dwell with you in perpetual glory; Amen” (1033-5)⁷⁰. *Sir Orfeo* ends simply with a one-line invocation: “God grant us all well to fare! Amen!” (604)⁷¹. Similar prayers are also found at the conclusion of numerous other romances, including *Sir Launfal*⁷², *Sir Isumbras*⁷³, and *Sir Gowther*⁷⁴. In fact, since this is probably the easiest sort of prayer to use because it is the most versatile, it is not surprising to discover it at the end of so many of the romances.

A particularly noteworthy parting prayer is found in *Sir Owein*, which ends: “Now God, for Seynt Owain’s love, / Graunt ous Heven blis above / Bifor His swete f ace! Amen” (1186-8). This finish is remarkable because although it is tied directly into the tale with mention of the eponymous hero, the actual structure of the formula would allow the insertion of just about any appellation. “Owein” could be replaced with any two-syllable name; “Saint” could be replaced with “Sir”; the two words together could be replaced with a three-syllable name, title, epithet or combination thereof. This is therefore an excellent example of the sorts of formulae preferred by oral composers in that it is easily memorized and at the ready while always permitting the insertion of specific details to tailor it to a particular situation. Here, however, it is used in a written tale, thus providing another example of how the oral tradition affects the development of the corpus of written literature.

Finally, while such requests for a universal blessing on the poet, the audience and mankind in general are most common, the compositor of *Havelok*, takes advantage of the occasion to request a special prayer for himself:

Therefore I would beseech you
Who have now heard my rhyme,
That each of you, with good will,
Quietly say an Our Father
For he who has made the rhyme,
And thus stayed awake many a night,
So that Jesus Christ bring his soul
Before his Father at the end of his days (2994-3001)²⁵.

Given his rather cheeky address to “goodmen, goodwomen, maidens and all men” in the tale’s opening, one might very well wonder if this poet’s request is not actually an irreverent joke. Such speculation is particularly merited when one considers that, generally speaking, these concluding prayers are probably not meant to be taken any more seriously than the exhortations at the beginning of the tales or in the bookmarks that occur periodically throughout them. In reality, the prayers seem to serve as nothing more than an indication that the tale is over, the medieval romance’s equivalent to a modern film’s ending credits. And as if to drive the point home, most of them then end with a capital “EXPLICIT” “FINIS” or “AMEN,” thus providing a visual effect on the manuscript page that has all the finality of a cinematic “THE END” on the big screen.

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Overall, however, it seems that neither the audience named in the exhortations nor the actual directives provide throughout the narrative or at its end were necessarily meant to be taken entirely seriously. Though they may have indeed evolved from aspects of oral recitation, it appears that by the time the Middle English verse romances came into vogue, these nods to orality were most likely stylised forms that were simply fixed and expected. In this respect they remained important attributes of the genre, if no longer absolutely essential elements. Since the original need for the formulae was greatly diminished with the shift from the oral to the written tradition, authors were often able to use the tags ironically to inject humour into their works. But despite their apparent redundancy, to some extent they continued to aid in regulating the narrative flow of a tale. Many were even updated to reflect the new situation by making direct reference to writing in tags that served identical functions as those that continued to refer to listening and hearing. Furthermore, the tags themselves aided composers, and more recently, modern editors in selecting points of episodic division in their own written version or printed editions. Thus, regardless of the composition of the audience or whether the tale was being read, recited or performed, the tags continue to function much as they did in the oral tradition. We can therefore see how orality has left its imprint on this particular genre of literature created in the written tradition, and perhaps such observations in this one instance can be used as a springboard for studies of a similar nature treating different genres in the same cultural tradition or even developments in literary traditions further afield.
NOTES

1. Examples would be the use of ain’t or (in British English) gotten; likewise, the use of “dialect words” such as Southern US y’all (“you all”) or Scottish outwith (“outside,” “beyond”) bairn (“child”) or greet (“cry”). The use of abbreviation or “conventional” phonetic spellings, such as ’em for “them” or gonna for “going to,” etc. Rudyard Kipling makes use of such devices in, e.g., his poem “Tommy” (1890), l.2: “The publican ’e up an’ sez, “We serve no red-coats here.””

2. A notorious example is Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, in which the author readily admits to trying to reproduce 6-7 different accents and dialects with the caveat: “I make this explanation for the reason that without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer’ but that ain’t no matter” (p. 3). Generally, the tale is narrated in the voice of Huck, who does use dialect, but one very close to Standard English: “You don’t know me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer’ but that ain’t no matter” (p. 5). A more difficult accent is Jim’s: “But Huk, dese kings o’ ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat’s jist what dey is” (p. 140). (Quotations taken from: Twain, Mark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004.) More recently, Iain Banks has used Scottish dialect in, e.g., The Business (1999).

3. This was a frequent complaint of Hugh MacDirmid’s poetry in Lallans, and more recently, the Scots dialect represented by Irvine Welsh in Trainspotting. See; e.g., Ford, John. “Evolution and Devolution: An Examination of the Historical Development of Scottish English.” La Tribune Internationale des Langues Vivantes 36 (2004): 12-23; see especially pp. 8-9.

4. There is, of course, the question of verse, which would not normally be considered a natural way of speaking. Verse is, however, highly characteristic of the oral tradition, and it is frequently in verse that the earliest examples of any culture or language’s literature emerges. Cf. Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey in Greek (ca. 8th c. BC); the poems of Ennius (239-169 BC) and plays of Plautus (254-184 BC) and Terence (ca. 170-80 BC) in Latin; Beowulf (ca. AD 700-1000) and Caedmon’s Hymn (ca. AD 7th c.) in Old English; Canticle of Saint Eulalie in Old French (ca. AD 9th c.). In fact, it appears to be the rise of literacy that leads to a decline in verse as society becomes increasingly less dependent on the mnemonic functionality of verse, which helps the memorization, and thus the preservation, of traditional poems, songs and stories.

5. While Old English achieved a high degree of standardization based on the dialect and accent of the capital at Winchester, this influence diminished with the arrival of a French-speaking aristocracy and administration after the Norman Conquest. When English does re-emerge, it is the London accent that becomes pre-eminent, initially through its use as the language of the royal court and its use in official writs and proclamations. This prestige is heightened when printers such as Caxton begin using the dialect for their cheap and plentiful printing of books, eventually leading to standardization on this version of English around the 16th-17th centuries.

6. See, e.g., MacMahon, M., Basic Phonetics. Glasgow: English Language Department of the University of Glasgow, 1997; see especially p. 3.

7. It is not the case that all manuscripts accurately reflect the accent and dialect of the original author because, to a greater or lesser degree, the texts are usually “corrupted” by the accents and dialects of the various scribes who copied them. It was therefore previously thought that only holographs were of any value for evaluating the original authors dialect, the rest of the manuscripts being more or less a Mischsprache. More recently this point of view has come to be something of an oversimplification, as evidenced by the use of such texts as witnesses for the compilation of LALME (Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English). For a fuller treatment see, e.g., Smith, Jeremy. An Historical Study of English: Function, Form and Change. London: Routledge, 1996; see especially pp. 28-29.
8. Athelston begins thus: “Lord that is off myghtys most, / Fadyr and Sone and Holy Gost, / Bryng us out of synne / And lene us grace so for to wyrke / To love bothe God and Holy Kyrke / That we may hevene wynne.” NB: Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the various Middle English verse romances cited in this paper come from the electronic versions provided online by the TEAMS Middle English Texts Project, which can be accessed at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm>. Quotations are given in modern English translation in the body of the paper with the original Middle English text cited in the notes. For quotations provided only in the notes, only the original is given.

9. Sir Eglamour begins thus: “Jhesu Crist, of heven Kyng, / Graunt us all good endyng / And beld us in Hys bowre; / And gef hem joye that love to here / Of eldres that before us were / And lyved in grett antowre” (1-6).

10. The Earl of Toulouse (Erle of Toulous) begins thus: “Jhesu Cryste, yn Trynyté, / Oonly God and persons thre, / Graunt us wele to spede, / And gyf us grace so to do / That we may come thy blys unto, / On Rode as thou can blede!” (1-6).

11. To clarify, those romances that open with an invocatory prayer almost always follow it up immediately with an exhortation to the audience. Line 7 of Athelston, for example is “Lystnes, lordyngys, that ben hende”; line 7 of Sir Eglamour is “I woll you tell of a knyght”; line 7 of the Earl of Toulouse is: “Leve lordys, y schall you telle.” Such exhortations also appear after the prayer in Amis and Amiloun (2), Ywain and Gawain (4-6), the Sultan of Babylon (20). The majority of exhortative openings, however, are not prefaced by an invocatory prayer.

12. Original (Robert of Cisyle): “Princes proude that beth in pres.”

13. Original: “leve lordys”.

14. It is generally believed that the Middle English verse romances were produced for a growing English-speaking bourgeoisie in emulation of the French chansons de geste, lays and romances that had been popular among the French-speaking Anglo-Norman higher nobility. Particularly after the plague years, members of this emerging Anglophone middle class began to establish their importance and filter into the lower levels of the gentry and (ultimately) the nobility. They imitated the tastes of their social betters and wanted access to what they perceived of as good or courtly literature; but they wanted it in English, not French. The English verse romances therefore began to come into vogue around the end of the 12th century – which was ironically the moment when the genre was fast falling out of favour in France and among the French-speaking English upper classes.

15. Original: “Ac herkneth, lordinges that ben trewe.”


17. Original: “Lystnes, lordynys, that ben hende.”

18. “Lysteneth, lordinges, gente and fre.”

19. “Lystonnyth, lordyngus, a littyll stonde.”

20. “Lordinges, herkneth to me tale!”

21. Original: “All werthy men...”

22. Original: “Al that ben hend herkenith to me.”

23. Original: “Hende in halle and ye wole her / Off eldres that before us wer.”

24. Original: “Lef, lythes to me / Two wordes or thre.” Lef is a word that means “dear” or “friend”; here that connotation is retained in a generic address to “everyone.”


26. Original: “Alle beon he blithe / That to my song lythe! / A sang ich schal you singe.”

27. Original: “Lithes and listneth and harkeneth aright, / And ye shul here of a doughty knight.”

28. The original text says: “Herkneth to me, gode men - / Wives, maydnes, and alle men.” The “gode” is not simply an attributive adjective, but part of a title, referring to “wives” as well as to “men,” hence, “goodmen” and “goodwives.”
29. Originally, the term wife simply meant “woman,” a usage that lingers on today in certain other combinations such as fishwife or alewife.

30. In a similar vein, Octavian is addressed to “Greater and little, old and young” (original: “Mekyll and littill, olde and ynyge”; 1).

31. Original: “Y pray yow take hede!”

32. Original: “Lytheneth, and listeneth, and holdeth your tonge.”

33. Original: “Menstrelles that walken fer and wyde, / Her and ther in every a syde, / In mony a dyverse londe, / Sholde, at her bygynnynge, / Speke of that ryghtwes kyng.”

34. Original: “The childrenis names, as y yow hyght, / In ryme y wol rekene ryght / And tel in my talking.”

35. Letters are mentioned 11 times in the romance (ll. 14, 187, 193, 203, 206, 224, 299, 303, 364, 366, 715).

36. Original: “In book iwreten we fynde.” The footnote to this line on the TEAMS edition notes that the expression is “[a] conventional phrase often repeated in the poem in variant forms, that is a probable reason scholars still seek a lost source.” In all probability, this claim is as spurious as that of Geoffrey of Monmouth to a “British source” as the basis of his Historia Regum Britanniae (“The History of the Kings of Britain,” ca. 1136). Even in antiquity, writing had been associated with authority. In the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for authors to “lie” by claiming a written authority to justify their work even when such a source did not exist. Many of these works would probably have had written sources (e.g., Glidas’s L’Estoire des Engles, Wace’s Roman de la Rou), and as Nancy Vine Durling points out, “Oral tradition can be authentic and, once it has been transcribed in a book, can contribute to authoritative history” (17). See: Durling, Nancy Vine. “Translation and Innovation in the Roman de Brut.” Medieval Translators and their Craft. Ed., Jeanette Beer. Studies in Medieval Culture 25. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989. See also, Ford, John. From Poésie to Poetry: Remaniement and Mediaeval Techniques of French-to-English Translation of Verse Romance. University of Glasgow (unpublished doctoral thesis): 2000. See especially chapter 2, § 5.1-5.6.

37. Interestingly, the mention of writing in King Horn refers to a princess dictating a letter to someone who knows how to write, suggesting that she herself does not.

38. Though, to be fair, this would probably have been accompanied by a bit of mumbling and lip moving in the Middle Ages. It is widely believed that there was no truly silent reading as we have today.

39. Original: “In romaunce as we rede.”

40. The only difference to be found in all these occurrences is an occasional spelling variation. Sir Isumbras, for example, reads “romaunse”; in the following example cited, Amis and Amiloun reads “reede” in line 2448 (but has the same spelling as Sir Launfal in line 27). In all these cases, however, the actual words are reproduced verbatim.

41. Original: “In gest as so we rede. ”

42. Original: “In boke as so we rede.”

43. Original: “In gest to rede it is gret rewthe.” The modern reflex of rewthe is ruth, a word meaning “pity” or “compassion.” The word is not commonly found today, though its antonym, ruthless, is common enough.

44. Original: “Thus in gest rede we. ”

45. “In boke as men rede. ”

46. “In boke aswerede.” ( Citation from Horn Childe is taken from an online text of the Auchinleck manuscript, provided by the National Museum of Scotland at: <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/horn.html>.)

47. “In romans as men rede.” (“In romance as men read. ”)

48. 470: “Truly, as tho romandys seyd” (“Truly, as those romances said”); 543: “Thus this romans told” (“Thus this romance told”).

50. Lay le Freine (original): “We redeth oft and findeth ywritte - / And this clerkes wele it wite - / Layes that ben in harping”; Sir Orfeo (original): “We redeth oft and findeth y-write, / And this clerkes wele it wite, / Layes that ben in harping.”

51. Original (36-37): “Men uses now another craft / With worde men makes it trew and stabil.” Scholars have consistently acknowledged that worde in this context means “writing.”

52. See endnote 39.

53. Original: “Al that ben hend herkenith to me, / I pray yow, par amoure.”

54. Original: “Herkeneth and ye mow here.”

55. Original: “Thus in gest as ye may here.”

56. Original: “Hende, herkneth! Is nought to hide, / So douhti knightes, in that tide / That ferd out of that toun.”

57. Original: “Lete we Sir Amiloun stille be / With his wiif in his cuntré - / God leve hem wele to fare.”

58. Original: “Now, hende, herkneth, and ye may here / Hou that the doukes douhter dere / Sike in hir bed lay.”

59. Original: “Now, hende, herkneth, and y schal say / Hou that Sir Amiloun went his way.”

60. 1917: “In gest as ye may here.” This formula occurs in the ninth line of the stanza, closing off the third tercet; 2355: “In gest as ye may here.” This formula occurs in the third line of the stanza, thus closing the first tercet.

61. Original: “So in a time, as we tel in gest.”

62. Original: “Al thus, in gest as we sain.”

63. Original: “In gest as it is told.”

64. Original: “In gest as so we rede.”

65. 2484: “As ye have herd echoon”; 2196: “In gest as we finde.”

66. Original: “Far also farre as i haue gone, / Such two louers sawe i none: / Therfore blessed may theyr soules be, / Amen, Ame.; for charyté!” Since The Squire of Low Degree is not found on the TEAMS site, this quotation is translated from the edition of French and Hale, pp. 721-55. (French, Walter Hoyt and Charles Brockway Hale, eds. Middle English Metrical Romances. New York: Prentice Hall, 1930.)

67. Original: “And for her trewth and her godhede / The blisse of hevyn they have to mede, / That lasteth ever moo.”

68. Original: “Now Jesu, that is Hevene-kyng, / Leve nevere traytour have betere endyng, / But swych dome for to dye.”

69. Original: “Jesus, that is of hevene king, / Yeve us alle His swete blessing.”

70. Original: “Jhesus, that settes yn Thy trone, / So graunte us wyth The to wone / In thy perpetuall glorye! Amen.”

71. Original: “God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!”

72. “Jhesus, that ys hevene kyng, / Yeve us alle Hys blessyng, / And Hys modyr Marye! / AMEN” (1042-45).

73. “Jhesu Cryst, hevene Kyng, / Geve us ay Hys blessyng / And schylde us from care” (770-71).

74. “Jesu Crist, Goddys son, / Gyff us myght with Hym to won, / That Lord that is most of meyn. Amen” (754-6).

75. Original: “Forthi ich wolde biseken you / That haven herd the rim nu, / That ilke of you, with gode wille, / Saye a Pater Noster stille / For him that haveth the rym maked, / And ther-fore fele nihtes waked, / That Jesu Crist his soule bringe / Biform his Fader at his endinge.”
Bien que les romans en vers anglais des XIIIe et XIVe siècles aient beaucoup en commun avec la nouvelle moderne, il est rare que l’on fasse le lien entre eux. La position qu’occupent les romans en vers par rapport aux plus longues épopées est comparable à la place de la nouvelle par rapport au roman moderne, et on notera que le terme français “nouvelle” peut s’appliquer à l’anglais “short story” comme à l’expression “verse romance.” La romance en vers est aussi particulièrement intéressante dans l’exploration de la transition d’une tradition principalement orale à une tradition principalement écrite. Par exemple, un élément de base de la composition orale est l’utilisation du vers, et ce genre partage cette caractéristique. La composition orale se fonde également fortement sur l’utilisation des formules, souvent disposées paratactiquement, et les romances conservent ce même trait. Cependant, il est également indéniable que ces romances sont le produit d’une culture lettrée. La mise en page révèle une division visuelle des vers en un arrangement strophique ; or, ces éléments ne sont pas essentiels pour noter le vers oralement composé et ils sont donc souvent omis dans les premières transcriptions. D’ailleurs, bien que les romances en vers fassent fréquemment référence à des sources écrites et à la lecture, les formules employées pour faire ces références sont essentiellement orales dans leur composition et dans leur utilisation. En conclusion, le fait plus remarquable est peut-être la conservation de l’adresse directe exhortative et parfois du discours phatique entre la voix narrative et les auditeurs/lecteurs présumés. De tels éléments sont communs en composition orale parce qu’ils sont très utiles pour régler un récit non écrit mais ils sont évidemment moins importants dans les récits composés dans un milieu lettré qui a recours aux divisions visuelles dans la mise en page. Par exemple, quand ces éléments sont employés dans la prose moderne ils ont souvent un effet quelque peu comique ou cocasse informel, alors que c’était un élément fondamental attendu par les lecteurs/auditeurs du roman en vers. Toutefois, au cours du XIIIe et du XIVe siècle, cette convention est finalement détournée à des fins comiques.

AUTHOR

JOHN FORD

John Ford is head of the Department of Literature and Languages (Lettres & Langues) and a maître de conférence in English at the Centre Universitaire de Formation et de Recherche Jean-François Champollion in Albi. He specializes in medieval English and Anglo-Norman literature, and has authored several articles dealing with the verse romances, medieval translation techniques, manuscript studies, the use of oral-formulaic diction in traditional literature, gender characterization in medieval literature, and diachronic studies in the development of spoken English.
The reading eye from *scriptura continua* to modernism: orality and punctuation between Beckett’s *L’image* and *Comment c’est/How It is*

Anthony Cordingley

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1 Samuel Beckett’s prose piece of 1959, *L’image*, stages a dramatic contest between language as written and as oral. It began as an offshoot from an early manuscript of *Comment c’est*, the novel Beckett began just before Christmas, 1958, finished and published in 1961 and subsequently translated into English as *How It Is* by 1964. From the punctuated sentences of the early drafts, *L’image* evolved into a short prose piece (ten pages in the Minuit edition) where, beyond the unit of the word, the only punctuation between the first capital and the final full stop, ten pages later, is the space separating each word from the next. The narrative voice is marked with the kinds of repetitions, back tracking and false starts typical of spoken discourse, normally censored from the written record. Yet spoken prosody is harmonised through poetic effects and a rhythm whose musicality is beyond everyday speech. The voice finds traction with the reader through its typographic presentation: without any punctuation the reader is forced to listen for the rhythms of the prose to delimit clauses. This voice is abstracted in a world composed of nothing but itself, its body and a kind of primordial mud. The ostensible business of the fiction is to reproduce with accuracy an image from this body, this memory. The content of the memory is itself arbitrary, the narrator chances upon the “memory” of when he was sixteen, climbing a mountain with his girlfriend. The story witnesses the effort to control the memory’s form, to specify it in language without its factual integrity usurped by the controlling energies of prosody in speech, poetic associations within language itself, or formal constraints of its record in written language.

2 In the midst of the recollection the narrator says “j’ai l’absurde impression que nous me regardons” (14), such a deliberate incoherence places language as the subject matter. Foregrounded since Saussure argued for an arbitrariness of the sign – its assemblage of
differences and lack of a positive value – the issue has been at the heart of contemporary debates in linguistics, semiotics and literary theory, and is played out through accounting for the divisions of form-content, parole-langue, spoken-written. These problems focus into the scene of writing and reading with L’image – the elimination of punctuating marks attempts not only to recast the written word as a unit of spoken language but disrupts the rapid, silent reading of the text. The written condition of the word in L’image exhibits its desire to be heard as audible voice and not the grapheme of written culture. To approach the relationship between orality, text and reading we find a useful point of comparison between two very different reading cultures: Beckett’s and that of his Irish countrymen in the seventh century. This frames the historical development of rapid silent reading, from the moment of its beginning to modernist attempts to disrupt its hegemony in the interpretation of structured written prose, to make the sentence a character of sound. A neurolinguistic account of the interaction between the reading eye, punctuation and the written sentence will help us to judge the implications of Beckett’s dramatisation of this contest of word as image and sound, in the process of which we discover a fundamentally ironic dramatisation of a modern reading predicament.

3 Jakobson’s poetic function – “The set (Einstellung) towards the message as such, focuses on the message for its own sake” (Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics”, 69) - operates in the linguistic realm of the text: “The function of a given message is an intrinsic quality of that message itself; thus, the focus on the message is an inherent quality of the poem” (Waugh, 62). In 1960, George A. Miller, psychologist and proponent of the “cognitive revolution” in literary studies, commented on Jakobson’s poetic function pre-empting certain modern cognitive and reader response approaches:

The poet announces, by the form in which he writes it, that this product is a poem; the announcement carries an invitation to consider the sounds of these words as well as their meaning. If we wish to participate in this game, we will adopt an attitude of phonetic, as well as semantic, sensitivity to the words he uses. (390)

4 An imminence and a potentiality, poetic language is an invitation to the reader to adopt a certain ear to the text. Yet there is not here the empiricism of Piaget, whose “tout est dans le texte” (everything is in the text) remains, nevertheless, to be constructed by a reader: “L’objet est connu comme qu’au travers des actions du sujet qui, en le transformant parvient à reconstituer à la fois les lois de ces transformations (comprenant son mode de production) et les invariants qu’elles comportent.” (The object is encountered through the actions of the subject who in transforming it manages to reconstitute in the moment those rules of transformation [understanding its mode of production] and the invariants it carries.) (116). This doesn’t enter into the realm of George Poulet’s phenomenological account of reading where the reader surrenders to the consciousness of the text – “I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me” (1323). In Kristeva’s semiotics the reader’s identification of a speaking subject in the text sees a constant passage from subject to non-subject in poetic language: “Dans cet espace autre où les lois logiques de la parole sont ébranlées, le sujet se dissout et à la place du signe c’est le heurt de signifiants s’annulant l’un l’autre qui s’instaure” (In this other space where the logic of speech is unsettled, the subject is dissolved and in place of the sign is instituted the collision of signifiers cancelling one another). (273). In his extended critique of Kristeva in Pour la poétique II, Henri Meschonnic argues that rather than talking about the disappearance of the subject it is more useful to stress both the impersonality of writing and how the reader attempts to
form its fictional persona (54). Though neither Meschonnic nor Miller allow the poetic function to reside entirely with the reader as Stanley Fish did in *Is there a text in this class?*, an extreme version of American reader response theory.

Yet Miller might have considered that bringing the voice into relief from its other habitual ‘fluent’ reading practices will often make a reader (at least) intermittently conscious of their own language, of the change in their own reading and perhaps even the sound of their own voice. If we accept Derrida’s argument in *de la Grammatologie* that the nature of voice as consciousness, the *s’entendre parler* [hearing-understanding-oneself speak] (17), institutes a myth of metaphysical self-presence, we may nevertheless consider how differences of voice in reading will bring about different reflections of that ‘self’ upon ‘itself’. In the context of 1920s and 30s modernism, Gertrude Stein approached this question when, with reference to her novel *The Making of Americans* in the lecture “Poetry and Grammar”, she spoke implicitly of a reader engaging Miller’s semantic and phonetic “sensitivity”. In Stein’s complex sentences one function of the length, minimal punctuation, repetition and variation of clauses is to negate complacency in reading (one effect of punctuation), to induce self-consciousness in reading: “A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it”(320-1).

**Punctuation and the verbal image: a case of comparison in scripting modern and premodern voices**

From their shape on the page, it is clear that the words of *L’image* are not a species of conventional written language: the eye immediately notices the absence of capitals and punctuation marks – phrases are soon understood as delimited by prosodic rhythm. The first indentation (though absent from the first published version), initial capital and, ten pages later, the final full stop each have little to do with syntax or semantics, rather they mark a passing of time, framing the dramatic effort to build the image. The graphic unit which is respected throughout is the written word – accents on letters and apostrophes are retained as is the capitalisation of one proper noun, Malebranche.³

In his letter to Alex Kaun of 1937 Beckett expresses a desire to disrupt “the materiality of the word surface” in a way opposed to James Joyce’s “apotheosis of the word” or Gertrude Stein’s “logographs”. He calls his project the “literature of the unword”, an imperative to move beyond the “official English”, which includes writing within prescribed syntactical and graphic norms, of language assumed to be stable in its representative capacity, located in recognizable genres. He says, “more and more my own language appears before me as a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at things” (*Disjecta* 117). In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where punctuation is suppressed during Molly Bloom’s interior monologue, Molly still speaks in grammatically complete sentences. Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness writing may depart from the syntax of written language, though she continues to avail herself of its written conventions. In Stein’s tome of 1925, *The Making of Americans*, she experimented with unusually long sentences built of complex clauses, which are typically variations of repeated phrases strung together with conjunctions and prepositions though sparsely punctuated. Beckett’s attitudes towards punctuation from *L’image* to *Comment c’est/How It Is* develop the theory of punctuation implicit in *The Making of Americans*, and extrapolated upon by Stein in “Poetry and Grammar”.³
Stein’s hostility towards punctuation marks stems from her belief that written prose is so structured that they are mostly redundant. She loathes question marks and exclamation marks because they are precisely what the sense of a sentence should impose upon the reader. Capitals, she can either take or leave because they are purposeless. She is particularly loathsome of commas because they are servile marks; she likens them to the butlers of language, who take off our coats and put on our shoes for us, they do the work which the reader should do. A comma regulates our breathing though, “It is not like stopping altogether which is what a period does stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath and why emphasize one breath rather than another breath (320-21).” In this sentence, prosodic pauses fall after “altogether”, “does”, “on”, “breath”, “well”, “breath”; yet despite having only one comma the reader/listener easily senses the structure of the written sentence. While punctuation can specify logical relations between clauses, prosody does this in speech. In *The Making of Americans*, for instance, Stein’s attempts to score prosodic rhythm into her prose render punctuation largely superfluous because “punctuation cannot be described as a means of representing the prosodic properties of utterances” (Huddleston and Pullum 1728).

Stein distains nouns because they claim to represent the thing which they do not – for her meaning resides in effective language use. The attack on nouns translates into an attack on form and so she wants to dynamite “newspaper narrative”, which can include anything from the newspaper to dreary realism, anything where rhetorical effect in language is neutralised or predictable. Furthermore, she deplores the inclination in the German language towards neology. She objects to the invention of new names and new words because this should require a tremendous amount of “inner necessity”. She defines herself against what has since evolved into a very identifiably Joycean figure:

Language as a real thing is not imitation either of sounds or colours or emotions it is an intellectual recreation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as long as humanity is anything. So everyone must stay with the language their language that has come to be spoken and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation. (331)

In *Ulysses*, neologism isn’t the hyperactive trope it is in *Finnegans Wake* but there is no doubt that its exuberant language is the antithesis to what is suggested here by Stein, or Beckett, in his “literature of the unword”.

Despite the striking form of its page – where unpunctuated words in lower case form a clean rectangle of ink – *L’image* is not situated in the tradition, from George Herbert’s pictograms to Mallarmé’s typographic experimentation to the concrete poetry of the early twentieth century, which foregrounds language as a visual signifier. “No symbols where none intended” Beckett ends his novel *Watt*, and the materiality of the word in *L’image* tests the possibilities of an “unword” – engaging what Walter Ong identified in modern language, its incapacity to express orality without implying its literacy, writing (5-12). The form of the page, initially surprising to the eye, is subject to the effects of repetition: unlike the concrete poem’s desire for discrete closure, the narrative voice spills between each of the ten pages of *L’image*, one page barely distinguishable from the next. Curiously enough, there is at one level a similar effect to that of Apollinaire’s ideograms, which prune away verbosity in their telegraphic style, and where the initial speed of the visual impression undergoes a reversal through the demands that opaque, materialised language place upon the reader’s attention. Rather than letting the eye race to the end of the sentence, stanza or even poem, the form of Apollinaire’s
ideograms makes the eye slow down and look (Bohn, 321). Similarly, the eye which encounters Beckett’s text immediately registers the dissolution of that apparatus of graphic convention (which roots word to page); and as it becomes clear that the prose doesn’t conform to the anticipated patterns of prosodic rhythm engrained in writing, the efficiency of the reading eye is checked. This opens a space for sound to be heard.

From *scriptura continua* to seeing the sound

12 The practice in late antiquity and the early medieval period was for scribes to write in *scriptura continua*, that is, where letters sit next to each other on a page without inter-word space, and without distinctions between upper and lower case, commas, full stops, and other forms of punctuation. In a pivotal moment in the history of writing, *scriptura continua* was first systematically disrupted by the practice of precocious Irish scribes in the seventh century (Saenger 23; Parkes 2).

13 The insertion of space between words and the introduction of symbols of punctuation was rooted in the desire to make Latin more readable to those for whom it was a foreign language. This was particularly the case for the Irish because their spoken language was not a Romance language. This is not to ignore the distinctions punctuation subsequently held for grammarians and rhetoricians, who emphasized punctuation’s function in logical determination or the representation of rhetorical modes of speech respectively. Indeed, in late antiquity, the rhetoricians’ attitude towards punctuation is represented in Cicero’s scorn for readers who relied on punctuation: “*ne infinite feratur ut flumen oratio, quae non aut spiritu pronuntiantis aut interducta librarri sed numero coacta debet insistere*” (that the sentence may not drift along vaguely like a river, it should end, not because the speaker stops to breathe or the copyist has placed a mark of punctuation, but because the rhythm has brought it to a necessary close) (1xviii, 228). This is a very similar to Gertrude Stein’s belief in the redundancy of punctuation in writing due to the formality of written prosodic rhythm – the difference is that the rules governing the rhythms of Cicero’s prose, the metrical patterning of phrases and the *cursus*, were already defined logical and syntactical relations in rhetorical language. But without a native ear for Latin, Irish scribes found it very difficult to determine the boundaries of phrases within the unspaced blocks of lettering which characterised the scriptural transferral of this rhetorical speech.

14 Irish scribes’ feeling for the Latin word as an isolatable unit stems from their reliance on the morphological criteria of the ancient grammarians for whom word classes were ‘parts of speech’. This was visually translated by Irish scribes abandoning *scriptura continua* to make the parts of speech discernable to the foreign eye. Their practice connects with the Christian concern for the written word as a spiritual medium. Following Aristotle and Augustine they believed that letters were signs of signs through which one may converse with the absent – Augustine writes “*inuentae sunt autem litterae per quas possimus et cum absentibus colloqui: sed ista signa sunt uocum, cum ipsae voces in sermone nostro earum quas cogitamus signa sunt rerum*” (the words themselves in our speech are signs of the things of which we are thinking) (XV, x, 19). Though at around the time that the Irish began interspacing their texts Isidore of Seville conceived of letters as signs without sounds: while they conveyed the sayings of the absent, letters and words did so through a visual impression on the mind. This concept relates to Isidore’s perspective in his book of etymologies, the *Libri etymologiarum*, where the
power (uis) manifested in a word is apprehended only when the word's etymology and origin is known. Isidore thought that while reading, the voice was a distraction from the mind's grasping of this power. From this belief Isidore recommended silent reading.

To aid the eye's comprehension Isidore developed a grammatical hierarchy reflecting the Roman rhetoricians' analysis of discourse as divided into cola (or membra) and commata. He recommended the use of punctuating symbols such as the punctus and the positura (the ‘7’-shaped mark or ‘comma’) which were adopted and adapted by the Irish. Such visual markers came to be relied upon by readers in discerning the limits of clausulae within text and the rhythms of the cursus. Parkes contends that Isidore’s book of etymologies was widely circulated in the west at least up until the ninth century and that it had particular impact among the Irish and their pupils, encouraging them to regard the written word as having its own ‘substance’ and a status equivalent to, but independent of, the spoken word (22-3).

Irish scribal practices were exported through the monasteries to the British Isles where punctuation signs grew in number. Conventions for their usage came to be more widely recognized in literate communities and moving to the British Isles, these symbols were expanded upon and through the church came to influence continental manuscript culture. Interestingly though, Parkes shows how in the period of the graphic development in Ireland, the Irish were reluctant to introduce the same changes to texts in their own, spoken language. It is not until the late middle ages that silent reading was a much more common practice, but the course away from speaking or murmuring texts, was made possible by the introduction of punctuating space between words. As Saenger points out, isolating one word from the next amidst a block of unspaced text had once been the cognitive function of the reader of sciptura continua, but this punctuation then became the task of the scribe (13). Over time, word separation and other visual marks of punctuation altered and simplified the neurophysiological process of reading. This was the crucial shift which in future centuries allowed the reader to receive silently and simultaneously the text and encoded information that facilitates both comprehension and oral performance (Saenger 13; Parkes 49). While rapid, silent reading is not the exclusive practice of the modern reader – the diversity of daily reading situations requires a flexibility of reading speeds to facilitate comprehension – the structured nature of modern prose is easily absorbed by a reading eye such that it scans faster than the sound of words registered in the brain. Much faster than normal speech, the sound of text is chopped and blurred.

Yet in the Psychology of Reading, contemporary neurolinguists Rayner and Pollatsek find evidence that when omitting typographic symbols of punctuation from the prose the speed of the reader’s comprehension is disrupted. This is because we have come to rely on these visual signs to regulate the saccadic movements of the eye (the jumps which our eyes make across a page when reading). The brain groups words together into recognisable units determined by their visual form. We use this mental and physical interaction when reading to determine the syntactical boundaries in the written sentence. It is the interaction of visual and syntactical consistency which allows us to read silently and rapidly (Rayner and Pollatsek 133).
Feeling with the eyes, seeing with the tongue

La langue se charge de boue un seul remède alors la rentrer et la tourner dans la bouche la boue l’avaler ou la rejeter question de savoir si elle est nourrissante et perspectives sans y être obligé par le fait de boire souvent j’en prends une bouchée c’est une des mes ressources la garde un bon moment question de savoir si avalée elle me nourrirait et perspectives sans y être obligé par le fait de boire souvent j’en prends une bouchée c’est une des mes ressources la garde un bon moment question de savoir si avalée elle me nourrirait et perspectives qui s’ouvrent ce ne sont pas de mauvais moments me dépenser tout est là la langue ressort rose dans la boue que font les mains pendant ce temps il faut toujours voir ce que font les mains eh bien la gauche nous l’avons vu tient toujours le sac et la droite eh bien la droite au bout d’un moment je la vois là-bas au bout de son bras allongé au maximum dans l’axe de la clavicule si ça peut se dire ou plutôt se faire qui s’ouvre et se referme dans la boue s’ouvre et se referme c’est une autre de mes ressources ce petit geste m’aide je ne sais pourquoi j’ai comme ça des petits trucs qui sont d’un bon secours même rasant les murs sous le ciel changeant je devais être malin déjà elle ne doit pas être bien loin un mètre à peine mais je la sens loin un jour elle s’en ira toute seule sur ses quatre doigts en comptant le pouce car il en manque (9-10)

The tongue gets clogged with mud only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit question to know whether it is nourishing and vistas though not having to drink often I take a mouthful it’s one of my resources last a moment with that question to know whether of swallowed it would nourish and opening of vistas they are not bad moments tire myself out that’s the point the tongue lolls out again rosy in the mud what are the hands at all this time one must always see where the hands are at well the left as we have seen still holds the sack and the right well the right after a while I see it way off at the end of its arm full stretch in the axis of the clavicle if that can be said or rather done opening and closing in the mud opening and closing it’s another of my resources this small gesture helps me I know not why I have such little devices that assist me along even when hugging the walls under the changing skies already I must have been quite shrewd it mustn’t be that far a bare yard but it feels far it will go some day by itself on its four fingers thumb included for one is missing (165)

The sentences of L’image are grammatical even if unpunctuated; this opening passage is steeped in the typical discourse of inner speech. Among the features of such discourse Jakobson identifies rhetorical self questioning – “question de savoir si elle est nourrissante” (question to know whether it is nourishing), “si ça peut se dire dire ou plutôt se faire ” (if that can be said or rather done) – and the inverted answer and question game where the subject knows beforehand the reply to the question he will put to himself – “que font les mains pendant ce temps il faut toujours voir ce que font les mains eh bien” (what are the hands at all this time one must always see where the hands are at well) (Jakobson, “Language in Opposition” 53). In L’image the search for legs and eyes re-enacts this ritual, and the self affirming, phatic “eh bien”, or, “oh” comes with each discovery. Redundant internal dialogue takes place in the mental wanderings and retracings – “j’ignore d’où je tiens ces histoires de fleurs et de saisons je les tiens un point c’est tout” (12) (I don’t know where I get these stories of flowers and seasons I’ve got them full stop that’s it), “j’ignore d’où je tiens ces histoires d’animaux je les tiens un point c’est tout” (13) (I don’t know where I get these stories of animals I’ve got them full stop that’s it)? – and in hesitations and reformulations – “l’avaler ou la rejeter question de savoir si elle est nourrissante... question de savoir si avalée elle me nourrirait... question de savoir pourquoi une laisse dans cette immensité de verdure” (10-4) (swallow the mud or spit question to know whether it is nourishing ... question to know whether if swallowed it would nourish ... question to know why a leash in this immensity of verdure) (165-167). The “un point”
as ‘full stop’ or ‘period’ is comic in the context of an entirely unpunctuated prose while also suggesting the inescapability of literacy in modern speech.

The spoken voice is, for Barthes, in a state of perpetual “innocence”. It is fresh, natural, spontaneous, truthful, expressive of a kind of pure interiority. The idea appears not to be that speakers never lie but that they truthfully reveal their lying states – in speech “L’innocence est toujours exposée” (our innocence is always exposed). But when our voices pass into text we protect ourselves, we monitor and censor ourselves, we block our arrogances, self-deprecations, waverings, ignorances and often our pain – all the moirés of our imagination, the personal tussle of our moi (Barthes, 10). What if the voice on the page is not the public and intellectual “dialogue” Barthes sees mediating these two realms, but simply a narrative voice engrained with those moirés of its spoken discourse? Perhaps as purely indirect discourse the ‘speech’ of the narrator might be thought to be even more “innocent” – we access, it may seem, the uncensored monologue of the self, complete with its internal dialogue. But this is not poetic improvisation or even automatic writing, there isn’t the innocence of either spoken or indirect discourse but the theatricality of feigned speech.

In the parallel evolution of this text in Comment c’est, Beckett’s revisions from draft to draft gradually eroded the grammaticality of the written sentence. He struck out large numbers of prepositions, articles, conjunctions – many short words which provide logical connectivity in prose. Peering into the private world of the manuscripts, we find some of the old garb of a ‘healthy’, graphical normality: capitals, commas and full stops; the complete expression of syntactical relationships in sentences. For example, the first version of what was to become the eighth paragraph of the published edition contains grammatical, fully punctuated sentences, and subject and predicate are still in tact.

This draft was revised through six subsequent manuscripts until it began to resemble the form of the finished version. In early drafts the prose style evolved from the kind above to one similar to that towards the end of L’Innommable: sentences burgeon into long sequences of phrases punctuated by commas. Though here we can see short sentences with capitals and punctuation, commas and question marks which still afford the reader the aid of graphic signs to indicate the order of syntax.

This is almost like a short hand of the original paragraph. Some articles and verbs have been erased, as for example in the opening fragment which was originally, “Les temps ont changé”, while now the expected conjunction is missing between “Temps changés”
and “moi aussi”. The flexibility of this prose syntax sees it gravitate towards the kind of practice associated with poetry where sonic effects begin to delimit clauses. Indeed at this point in the manuscript’s evolution we can see how rhyme interacts with prosody to define units of syntactical sense: “temps changés / moi aussi / ici commence la première partie / je ne disais plus / d’où vient ce sac / comment ai-je échoué ici / est-ce moi impossible ”. Jakobson believed that, “Only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of the speech flow experienced, as it is – to cite another semiotic pattern – with musical time” (Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics” 72). Similarly we see here Beckett’s revising towards phrases extending for two rhythmic beats (doubled in the third and sixth); the pattern stretches the last “moi” rendering the space of mental consideration, and rejection: impossible. Such patterns are intermittent and flexible, there is no overarching regularity to the prosody though here we see how the tonic rhymes help to determine the rhythmical units.

23 The paragraph endures fine tuning over five subsequent revisions until it found its final form:

première partie avant Pim comment échoué ici pas question on ne sait pas on ne dit pas et le sac d’ou le sac et moi si c’est moi pas question impossible pas la force sans importance
part one before Pim how I got here no question not known not said and the sack whence the sack and me if it’s me no question impossible too weak no importance

24 The most elementary, grammatical expression of the final words of this paragraph might have been c’est impossible, je n’ai pas la force, cela est sans importance. Prosiopesis, parataxis and asyndeta are features of this language, chopped phrases are linked together with conjunctions and words of logical connectivity. In either spoken or written discourse a reader would expect at least: [c’est] impossible [parce que / et / quand même] [je n’ai] pas la force [mais / donc / bon] [c’est / cela est] sans importance. Speakers are not prone to leave out articles, pronouns and auxiliary verbs from their discourse, as occurs in this typical paragraph from Comment c’est. Though by erasing these words Beckett cuts from the frame of the eye exactly those short-function words which Rayner and Pollatsek believe are most important in organizing eye movement in reading. It is around these that the eye frames its saccadic skips, because they are particularly easy to decode in parafoveal vision (Rayner and Pollatsek 133). The effect is to slow the reader’s eye and allow the text to be heard, as if a reader were speaking it to himself, or reading it aloud. Indeed this seems to be the point of the technique, it interacts with a foregrounded poetic function when the narrator says, “so many words so many lost one every three two every five first the sound then the sense” (123).

25 The narrator of Comment c’est/How It Is hears the voice of another, the “other above in the light” as the voice in his head. He claims to be a scribe both quoting and copying that voice – Beckett specified this voice to Hugh Kenner as the “narrator/narrated”.

This voice was “once quaqua then in me when the panting stops” – it has been internalised and he hears it between hearing his own breaths (the panting). Otherwise he is speaking/murmuring reciting the voice, and there are insistent references to his movements of the lower jaw and to his mouthing what he hears in his head. He hears himself in French “moi le cerveau bruits toujours lointains”. The noise is specifically divided in its English translation, “I am the brain of two sounds distant” because he is embroiled in a scene of self-translation – echoing in his mind is the original voice (in whichever language that may have been) and the French. 10 In this contemporary scribal
situation, the narrator/narrated is speaking-reading-repeating-mouthing (all are suggested) this voice that seals him in his mental world. Whichever it is, his isolation from competing sounds in fact positions him like a reader in a library of late antiquity whose very projection of voice focused the self upon that of the text and acted as a neurophysiological screen blocking out the sounds of adjacent readers. In L’image Beckett’s desire is to test one discourse in a hermetic enclosure to escape slippages and dialogism. Though by the time he reaches Comment c’est/ How It Is he dramatises Ong’s unthinkability of orality from within the graphocentrism of contemporary language. Beckett can return the written word to sound at the expense of formal written language, ironically, however, the extraction of voice from a reader does not ultimately return the word to speech, but rather to something like that fragmented language heard in the head during the act of rapid, silent reading – that act so entwined with the visual culture of the printed page.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


2. “I have the absurd impression that we see me”. The French is ungrammatical.

3. The first version has nineteen commas and the rare capitalisation, such as “Mon cheri” and “Mon amour”, all of which had been removed from the Minuit edition, save the capital for Malebranche.

4. Saenger uses the term “scriptura continua” in Space Between Words, while in Pause and Effect, Parkes uses “scriptio continua” to refer to the same practice.

5. The malleability of the foreign language is one point of connection with L’image, yet Beckett was bilingual at the time of its writing. However, his first French novel Molloy shows that Beckett was more than capable of writing a long and beautifully balanced, classically styled French sentence. The point is not being made that Beckett had difficulty with understanding the foreign language or its writing.

6. The “well” of Fournier’s translation “well the left as we have seen still holds the sack” mixes the phatic with a logical relationship more strongly than in Beckett’s French. The effect lessens the surprise in favour of the colluding function, this “well” is like ‘and so’, ‘as we know’.

7. These two translations are mine – Fournier’s translation skirts around the phatic “un point”.

8. Samuel Beckett, Comment c’est/How It Is, 207. San serif font represents words in the manuscript which survive into the final manuscript but in a different order or position. Words in < > are autograph revisions.

ABSTRACTS
A partir du 7ème siècle, les scribes irlandais ont développé les premiers signes de ponctuation dans la perspective de mieux comprendre les textes latins qu’ils copiaient. Quand Samuel Beckett efface la ponctuation de son texte en prose, L’image, publié en 1959 il refuse au lecteur la béquille graphique sur laquelle, pendant l’évolution de la culture graphique, l’œil avait appris à compter pour régulariser sa lecture rapide silencieuse. Contrairement à l’expérimentation typographique qui a beaucoup marqué la poésie d’avant-garde au vingtième siècle, le texte de Beckett révèle son désir d’être entendu comme son, s’approchant ainsi de la théorie de la ponctuation développée par Gertrude Stein. En revanche, quand Beckett a réintégré L’image dans son roman Comment c’est/How It Is, la fragmentation de la structure de la phrase a été une entrave supplémentaire dans la délimitation par l’œil des unités sémantiques. Dans Comment c’est/How It Is, une disposition rythmique unique commence à organiser le sens, que le lecteur doit écouter pour comprendre. L’effort de produire un texte “oral” dans la culture graphique ne nécessite pas seulement de sortir des conventions graphiques de la page, mais aussi des rythmes prosodiques qui organisent la parole dans la culture elle-même.

AUTHORS
ANTHONY CORDINGLEY
Anthony Cordingley is lecteur d’anglais at l’Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III and is completing a doctorate at the University of Sydney.
Orality in Richard Wright's short stories: playing and surviving

Laurence Cossu-Beaumont

This article offers a reading of Richard Wright’s short fiction with which the famous best-selling author of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) both started and ended his publishing career. Indeed the last book Wright prepared just before his premature death in 1960 was *Eight Men* (1961). Contrary to the disconnection deplored by critics who underestimate this last book, I suggest that this collection of eight short stories can be read as a work responding to his first publication ever, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), which displayed the destinies of five characters in the deep South. How has Wright portrayed the evolution of his early immature and often failing “children” and how has he conveyed the strength and power of his later “men”?

My perspective will focus on the oral dimension of such an achievement. Little explored in Wright is the oral dimension. He is generally studied according to a political line of reading in the spirit of this quotation and analysis of Wright by African American critic Harold Cruse: “He took his Marxism very seriously”. Zora Neale Hurston or James Baldwin among his most famous critics have all insisted on the political commitment as detrimental to the aesthetics. Here I want to argue that folklore, orality and black vernacular help Wright build his narratives as much as his political ideals may have and I want to show that he was not so serious at all. In the short stories considered, orality is not only a tool of verisimilitude for his portraits of black men and women. Wright does more than write dialogues or thoughts in the black vernacular and merely offer the black orality visibility on the page. More interestingly, orality, through the vernacular tradition, has a function in the narrative. The vernacular tradition of *signifyin(g)*, as best revealed in all its power by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and his 1988 study *The Signifying Monkey* was used by Wright to subvert the aesthetic norms of black representation and to alter prejudice. Gates reminds us that this oral tradition contains a wealth of aspects: whether a parody, mockery, whether simply making fun of someone or denouncing in a more critical mode, Gates suggests that two fundamental principles lie at its core.
1. The constant play between the literal and figurative levels of interpretation. Only those who can see beyond the literal meaning are able to fully grasp the message of the person who “signifies”. This will be a first line of analysis. How is criticism conveyed through a specifically black and oral tradition of “double entendre”?

2. Gates develops a literary theory from the street tradition. To him, black writers often re-appropriate this tradition through what he calls “repetition with a difference”. Wright does use established stories, images or characters but only to rewrite them and subvert them. What’s more, this principle can foster a repetitive structure rather than a linear building within one single narrative. This pattern will also be examined in this article.

3. In both books, Uncle Tom’s Children and Eight Men, the characters who do not die are those who signify on the prejudiced discourse of white society. It is my contention that the character’s success is either prefigured or allowed by his or her mastery of this African-American oral tradition which is a strategy of subversion. Orality is thus not only a central theme of African-American life as represented in Uncle Tom’s Children and Eight Men, but a tenet of Wright’s aesthetics in his writing and a means of survival in white society.

1. Big Boy’s fluency: playing and surviving in white America

6. This first example is significant and symbolical for it appears in the opening pages of the first short story of the first book ever published by Wright: “Big Boy Leaves Home” in Uncle Tom’s Children. It can be deemed a “defining” moment in his writing.

7. The story starts with dialogues. “Big Boy” and his three mates are playing the Dirty Dozens. The Dirty Dozens is a verbal game about someone’s mother where the participants have to come up with a new line and thus “defeat” their opponent, in other words, leave him speechless. It is thus a verbal fight.

Yo MAMA dont wear no drawyers ...
Clearly, the voice rose out of the woods, and died away. Like an echo another voice caught it up:
Ah seena when she pulled ’em off ...
Another, shrill, cracking, adolescent:
N’ she washed ’em in alcohol ...
Then a quartet of voices, blending in harmony, floated high above the tree tops:
N she hung ’em out in the hall
Laughing easily, four black boys came out of the woods into cleared pasture. They walked lollingly in bare feet, beating tangled vines and bushes with long sticks.
“ Ah wished Ah knowed some mo lines t tha song. ”
“ Me too. ”
“ Yeah, when yu gits t where she hangs em out in the hall yuh has to stop. ”
“ Shucks, whut goes wid hall ? ”
“ Call ”
“ Fall ”
“ Wall ”
“ Quall ”
They threw themselves on the grass, laughing.
“ Big Boy ? ”
“ Huh ? ”
“Yuh know one thing?”
“Whut?”
“Yuh sho is crazy!”
“Crazy?”
“Yeah, yuh crazys a bed-bug!”
“Crazy bout whut?”
“Man, whoever hearda quall?”
“Yeah, but whuts a quall?”
“Nigger, a qualls a quall”.

Interestingly enough this occurrence is quoted by Geneva Smitherman, the linguist who first wrote about Black vernacular and quoted by Henry Louis Gates as well: “one of the funniest representations of the dozens [...] appears in Wright’s short story, ’Big Boy Leaves Home’”. Yet the question is not so much about being “funny” - though it contradicts Cruse’s final judgment about Wright’s “seriousness” - but about how the narrative is built according to the black oral tradition.

In this extract, Big Boy is the winner of the verbal game, he masters this tradition to the point that he creates a word within its frame. This is an early indication that he can and will survive in black and white society. Indeed in the rest of the story, this early scene will be resumed in essence through a repetitive structure of episodes of fights and victories for Big Boy. This is the “repetition with a difference” alluded to in the introduction.

So Big Boy first wins the Dozens. In the next significant episode, he defeats his friend Bobo in a physical fight.

“Shucks, nigger, yuh almos broke mah neck”
“Ahmah smart nigger,” said Big Boy.

Being smart here is being street smart, mastering verbal and hand fights, and surviving in that environment. Indeed, in the third major episode of the short story, the four boys, who have been swimming in a forbidden pond, encounter a white man who threatens the trespassers with a gun. After shooting two of them, he is killed by Big Boy who has confronted him and taken his rifle. Unlike Bobo, the only other survivor of the shooting, who is lynched, Big Boy also lives through the night, hidden in a hole where he has to kill a snake, and strangle a hound. At dawn, he is able to flee North.

In this short story, Wright thus moves his point of view from a boy’s playful mastery of an oral tradition such as the Dozens to the conclusion that such mastery actually forecasts a vital “smartness”, the only surviving means for blacks in their oppressive environment. In Wright’s narratives, “surviving” is not merely literally staying alive, for we need to embrace a figurative perspective as well: surviving is also overcoming white oppression, humiliation, and achieving revenge. A character who dies can be a winner, even more so than a character who lives. For instance, Big Boy’s success is synonymous with flight and uprootedness, a sign that his proficiency has not yet reached the maturity and power later characters display. Aunt Sue, my next example, though she ultimately dies, is much more in control of her destiny.
2. Aunt Sue’s *signifying* : playing and retaliating in white America

13 Aunt Sue, from “Bright and Morning Star”, the story added to the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, is an old woman in the South and the mother of two Communist activists. She does not share her sons’ commitment which she does not understand. She is a very religious woman and prays for her sons’ sake. The elder one is already in jail for his subversive political activities. When the younger one is arrested and tortured by the sheriff’s men, because of the betrayal of a man named Booker, she seeks revenge out of her motherly pain, not out of Communist faith. The story is not a political plea, but rather a demonstration of the strength of black folklore to defeat white supremacy. Indeed the way powerless Aunt Sue reaches her end is also a compelling example of how Wright builds his narrative from climax to resolution through the tradition of *signifying*. Here it is no longer the repetitive pattern but the double entendre play upon literal and figurative levels of meaning that is at stake.

14 When the sheriff visits her and warns her that when they do find her son, they will take him away and punish him, he tells Sue in a figurative manner:

“Ef we hafta find im, then yuh git a sheet t put over im in the mawnin, see ? Git yuh a sheet, cause hes gonna be dead !”

15 When she learns he has actually been arrested and is being tortured and understands that Booker is responsible for this, she pretends to have taken the sheriff’s words seriously. Through this strategy, namely bringing a sheet as she was supposedly told to, she is able to pay an unsuspicious visit to the sheriff and his men:

“The niggers ma brought a sheet t cover up his body ! / Now, ain that sweet ? ”

16 Sue is actually hiding a gun under the sheet and at that point she shoots Booker. Though she is shot in return, she has accomplished her revenge.

17 Sue has signified on the white sheriff and his men in a double play on literal and figurative senses. She has them believe that she took their remark literally, which makes sense to them because she is a dumb old black woman. They deem her too stupid to be conspiring. She has hidden the gun under the sheet, and she turns the sheet, a supposed object of death and defeat, into an object of *signifying* and success for her mission. All this is achieved by Wright within the oral frame of *signifying* and black success is accordingly associated to black folklore rather than political, and particularly communist, commitment. This reading contradicts the often quoted criticism of *Uncle Tom’s Children* by Zora Neale Hurston:

“The reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutal hatred and nothing else. Mr Wright’s author’s solution, is the solution of the PARTY-State responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one’s self. And march !”

18 In “Bright and Morning Star”, Wright’s “author solution” is based upon the oral *signifying* strategies rather than on the political communist prescriptions. Other significant characters in *Uncle Tom’s Children* encounter their death because they are unable to defeat white authority and power in such a manner: they are either too weak to implement such strategies (Man in “Down by the Riverside” is unable to take his pregnant wife to the hospital in time; his choice to anonymously kill a white man in the confusion of a flood to steal his boat leads to nothing but his own death) or too strong...
and violent (Silas in “Long Black Song” launches a lonely direct attack against a group of whites who obviously end up killing him). In spite of the success of her deed, Sue remains among the “children” characters of Wright’s series for she dies and cannot save her family. In that sense, the characters from *Eight Men* display maturation in the use of folklore to defeat white racism and oppression.

### 3. Carl’s comedy of errors: playing and defeating white America

When Wright published the short story collection *Eight Men* in 1961, it was not well received. Black critic Saunders Redding wrote: “Wright had forgotten the tough American idiom. He had been gone from home for too long”. True, Wright had been living in Europe since 1947 but the short stories were written between 1937 and 1957. “Man of All Work” written in 1957 bears evidence to a mastery of the black *signifying* tradition. There is little colloquialism or dialect visible, but the story displays a much deeper mastery of the oral tradition than just an imitation on the page: the “repetition with a difference” technique is brought to a greater level of complexity and subversion because Wright plays on white traditions and stereotypes through this fundamentally black mode.

This story is entirely written in dialogue for it was meant to be a radio play. “Man of All Work” is the story of Carl, a young black husband and father of two, who is threatened of losing his home and the roof for his family if he does not get a job immediately. Out of other solutions, he has himself hired, disguised as a woman under his wife’s name, Lucy, as a maid in a white family. The dialogues are the opportunity for a constant play on the stereotyped sexual representations of black men and women.

In this short story the black oral tradition of *signifying* and the white theatre conventions of double entendre in dialogue, of “mishandled identity” as a drama convention through the disguise of a male character as female meet to serve both an aesthetic purpose of comic relief and a political purpose of denunciation of sexual domination and stereotypes.

Two scenes in particular are both funny and tragic. Tragic because when Mrs Fairchild who hired him asks Lucy/Carl to come into the bathroom to wash her back while she is taking a bath, it is a death situation for the black man Carl.

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- Well, what’s the matter with you, Lucy? Why are you poking your head like that around the door? Come in, I want you to wash my back with this brush.
- Then scrub my back. Hard. Why, your arms are like rubber. Well, I never. You’re acting very strange. Do I offend you because I ask you to wash my back? Bertha always helped me with my bath...
- It’s just the first t-t-time...
- Oh, I see. Well, I don’t see why I should frighten you. I’m a woman like you are”.
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And yet it is funny because Wright pushes it far when he has Mrs Fairchild actually expose herself to Lucy/Carl. She keeps questioning her maid about her figure, when she’s actually offering her body to a black male.

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- Don’t you think I’m too fat?
- Ma’am, some folks are just naturally a bit heavy, you know.
- But my breasts – aren’t they much too large?
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The scene goes on and the whole naked body of the white woman alone in a locked room with a black man is reviewed. Wright is actualizing all the supposed fantasies of black men for white women and thus playing on stereotypes thanks to drama traditions subverted.

In another scene, Wright also plays on white literary traditions when he has this scene typical of Little Red Riding Hood rewritten in the racial context through the “repetition with a difference” principle. Indeed little Lily, the daughter of the white family, is not as blind as adults can be because of their prejudices. She notices Lucy/Carl’s strangeness and questions him. He systematically answers in the wolf manner, ending his sentences with “child”.

“- Lucy your arms are so big.
- Hunh?
- And there’s so much hair on them.
- Oh, that’s nothing.
- And you’ve got big muscles […]
- Your voice is heavy, like a man’s.
- Oh, that’s from singing so much, child.
- And you hold your cigarette in your mouth like Papa holds his, with one end dropping down.
- Hunh? Oh that’s just because my hands are busy, child
That’s just what papa said when I asked him about it.”

There is indeed a wolf among the sheep, only no one realizes it, and especially not the husband as illustrated by his answer to his daughter. This, until Mrs Faichild shoots at Lucy because of her husband’s sexual interest in her; again, no need to insist on the irony. Wright has actually portrayed a white man trying to seduce a black man, a deadly situation and yet a source of comic relief not so remote from Shakespearian comedies.

When the Fairchilds thus realize Lucy is Carl, he could face death, but he skillfully manages to blackmail them: they buy his silence for the shooting and he goes home with a large sum of money with which he will pay his mortgage and keep his house. There, he cries from relief and happiness in the arms of his wife. Carl emerges as a black man who is able to support his family at all costs. He is thus the most successful character examined here: he has defeated the prejudices of his segregated and racist environment and has saved his honor and family. All this within the context of a genre where Wright subverts, in the black oral mode of signifying, white racial stereotypes, social conventions, and literary traditions.

Within this specific narrative and aesthetic frame, the children of Uncle Tom in their immature rebellion have grown into mature men. Indeed, other characters of this collection fail for this exact reason: they are unable to master and appropriate the tenets of black folklore. Saul in “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” becomes the murderer of a white woman –and is thus destined to a certain death- because his mind is blurred by superstitions and traditional sayings. On the other hand, Olaf only learns at the last minute that he should not have taken for granted the “Big Black Good Man” he has misunderstood: the black giant, far from the sexual predator and dangerous strangler he was supposed to be, reveals himself a careful lover for a prostitute he plans to marry and a grateful friend for Olaf who introduced them. In all cases, the play between literal
and figurative interpretation of a given situation is key to the literal or figurative survival of the character.

To conclude, one should bear in mind a new dimension in Wright’s writing revealed by this reading of orality in his short story writing. Interestingly enough, manhood seems to necessarily mean the acceptance of a feminine side. Witness to this is Carl, whose manhood—supporting his family—is only achieved through the jeopardizing of his virility and the experience of female vulnerability to white assaults. Wright thus offers a complex representation of black men with their weaknesses, feminine side, and courage to raise a family in a world that either treats them as sexual beasts (Big Black Good Man in *Eight Men*) or as immature “boys” (Big Boy or Man in *Uncle Tom’s Children*). What’s more, the other triumphing hero mentioned in this article, the only adequate trickster, is Aunt Sue, a heroin. This perspective is all the more relevant as the usual critical approach to Wright stresses his fondness for brutal male characters (Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* or Cross Damon in *The Outsider*) and the supposed weakness of his portrayal of the black woman in the community. These short stories offer a necessary counterpoint to his acclaimed but unfortunately overshadowing best sellers *Native Son* and *Black Boy* for in his writing of them the artful play on literary and vernacular tradition corresponds to the actual social and historical means of survival of blacks in white American society. In merging playing and surviving Wright manages to be a black writer with much more creativity, complexity, depth and cunning than he is generally remembered as.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHIE**


NOTES

2. The collection first included only four short stories. It was augmented on the occasion of the second printing in 1940.
8. Richard Wright, Uncle Tom’s Children in Early Works, op. cit., p. 245.
10. Ibid p. 436.
13. Ibid, p. 130.

RÉSUMÉS

Peu de critiques ont relevé la dimension orale de l’écriture de Wright. Or dans ses nouvelles, de Uncle Tom’s Children (1938) à l’orée de sa carrière à Eight Men (1961) paru un an après sa disparition, l’oralité n’est pas que couleur locale. Elle a même une présence stratégique à l’instar des modes d’expression noirs américains et de leur pouvoir de subversion qu’a démontré Henry Louis Gates dans ses études sur la tradition vernaculaire du signifying. Dans ces deux collections, seuls survivent les personnages qui savent affronter ou dépasser l’oppression blanche grâce aux stratégies propres à la communauté afro américaine. L’oralité et la maîtrise du langage métaphorique ou subversif comme seul pouvoir accessible aux noirs dans l’Amérique ségrégationniste se trouve donc être au centre de ces nouvelles et au cœur de l’écriture de Wright.

AUTEURS

LAURENCE COSSU-BEAUMONT

Laurence Cossu-Beaumont is an Assistant Professor at the University of Picardie in Amiens. She is a former Ecole Normale Supérieure student and teaching assistant at the University of Harvard.
She wrote her Ph.D. thesis on the works of African American writer Richard Wright. Through the study of his archives at Yale University, she reviewed the main sources of influence of his writing, such as 1930s radicalism, but also the black vernacular and literary tradition. She addressed the censorship upon publication and the controversies of the critical reception. Today, she concentrates on publishing history and on critical reception.
“Mah Story Ends,” or Does It?: Orality in Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Eatonville Anthology”

Trinna S. Frever

...Somebody tried to say that it was a mouth organ harp that John was playing, but the rest of them would not hear that. Don’t care how good anybody could play a harp, God would rather to hear a guitar. That brought them back to Tea Cake. How come he couldn’t hit that box a lick or two? Well, all right now, make us know it. When it got good to everybody, Muck-Boy woke up and began to chant with the rhythm and everybody bore down on the last word of the line:

Yo’ mama don’t wear no Draws
Ah seen her when she took ‘em Off
She soaked ‘em in alcoHol
She sold ‘em tuh de Santy Claus
He told her ‘twas aginst de Law
To wear dem dirty Draws
Then Muck-Boy went crazy through the feet and danced himself and everybody else crazy.

(Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, 149)

This passage from Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God contains a number of cues to understanding Hurston’s distinct use of orality within her fiction. First, in Hurston’s world, storytelling and music are often intertwined. Spoken language and song alike have rhythm, pitch, volume, vibrato, syncopation, inflection, and an ability to transcend the linearity of written music and the written word through the power of sound and voice. Hurston’s in-text guidelines as to where the emphasis should fall when speaking, as in “everyone bore down on the last word of the line,” demonstrate that this text is an oral one as well as a written one, designed to capture the qualities of the spoken voice. By having the community join in the chant, join in the singing, and join the creation of the music and the text simultaneously, Hurston further demonstrates that her use of orality is created by, and itself creates, a community around music, language, story, and sound. Drawing on oral storytelling techniques from an African American cultural context, and situating her firmly within
the literary and musical worlds of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston’s orality stretches far beyond the use of spoken dialogue or dialect in a text. Orality becomes an overarching aesthetic that shapes her narrative along vocal and communal lines, as a sung melody rather than a linear typescript. In turn, this synthesized oral-print text requires a reader to reconsider all assumptions brought to reading as an individual act, and a print form.

2 The mellifluous orality that appears in Their Eyes Were Watching God is even more evident in the Hurston’s collection of short sketches, “The Eatonville Anthology,” which precedes Their Eyes Were Watching God by more than ten years. Yet notably, Their Eyes Were Watching God remains the far more studied of the two texts, even in terms of its use of the oral voice. When “The Eatonville Anthology” is discussed, it is usually addressed as a forerunner of characters and narrative techniques that reappear in Hurston’s later work. For example Crosland, in his essay on an editorial error in the text, writes: “Because it exemplifies Hurston’s literary use of folklore and introduces characters and episodes which later appear in Hurston’s Mules and Men, Seraph on the Suwanee, and Their Eyes Were Watching God, the piece is attractive to anthologists” (422).

Alice Walker discusses “The Eatonville Anthology” as an imperfect version of themes and techniques that Hurston would get “perfectly right” in Their Eyes Were Watching God (175-6). My essay asserts that “The Eatonville Anthology” is a notable text for study in its own right, particularly for its use of oral aesthetics. The Eatonville sketches exemplify characteristics of style and construction that remove them from the realm of printed fiction, and place them on the precarious edge between the spoken and the written. Further, “The Eatonville Anthology” is a community text, using the short fictional form to depict the bonding of individuals into a community through spoken narrative. In both these respects, “The Eatonville Anthology” stands as an important example of the oral-print textual form.

3 In my previous work on orality, I draw upon works such as Walter Ong’s Orality and Literacy, Richard Bauman’s Verbal Art as Performance, The Empire Writes Back (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin), the anthology The Pressures of the Text (ed. Brown), Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s Figures in Black, and the writings of Native American author and theorist Paula Gunn Allen, to identify a set of characteristics that make up what I term the “oral-print” text: a text that interweaves the forms and aesthetics of oral storytelling and print fiction (Frever). Among these characteristics are the use of inset narration, whereby a story is passed off from teller to teller within a storytelling circle; a use of regional and/or colloquial language distinctive for both its sound and rhythm; the use of distinct speaking styles or idioms for individual characters; a use of onomatopoeia and sound words to rupture the linearity of the print form and the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relationship; an invocation of “mythic time” associated with fairy and folk tales, rather than the strict linear-historical time associated with print; a use of circular or episodic plot structure, again to disrupt the linear-historical print time; and a recreation of the relationship between author, text, and audience, realigning the normally individual act of reading with the shared act of listening, and of participating in narrative construction (Frever). Hurston’s work exemplifies all of these qualities, and “The Eatonville Anthology” adds another dimension to their portrayal, by the creation of a narrative community within the text, as well as between the text and its reader-listener.
For those unfamiliar with the text, “The Eatonville Anthology” is a collection of fourteen very short fictional sketches that illustrate folkloric-type episodes from the real-life community of Eatonville, Florida. It can be interpreted as a double-short story, in that each of the pieces is a short story or sketch unto itself, and their composite whole is also a short work. Twelve of the fourteen sketches could be termed character studies, as they each focus on a particular member of the Eatonville community and a distinctive personality trait associated with that character, revealing his/her role in Eatonville at large. For instance, Mrs. Tony Roberts is “the pleading woman,” who goes door to door begging for food, though the narrator is insistent that she is well provided for within her household (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 177-8). Her whiny refrain, “Tony doan’ fee-ee-eed me,” serves as a unique oral language moment that embodies her distinct personality, her distinct speaking style, and her role within Eatonville society (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 177). Similarly, Old Man Anderson is the keeper of old-time ways who is so afraid of the modern freight train that he runs from its noise with himself hitched to his wagon instead of his horse, translating a folk tale into the Eatonville world (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 179-80). Mrs. McDuffy is the woman who risks her husband’s wrath for shouting out in church, all because she can’t “squinch the sperrit,” another lively example of orality through both the aforementioned phrase, and the defiant act of vocalization (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 181). Even Tippy, the town dog, is given a personality and a community role in his propensity for stealing scraps from the “village kitchens” of “careless” housewives (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 178). While these brief descriptions of the Eatonville characters, from Mrs. Tony to the dog Tippy, sound nearly two-dimensional, more caricature than character, the danger of racial stereotyping is evaded by the effect of the text in its entirety, for each character is part of the full composite picture of the town and of the narrative. They are the many sides of a whole, rather than a complete picture unto itself. Thus, by its very structure, “The Eatonville Anthology” draws on oral narrative construction in several ways. “The Eatonville Anthology” uses distinct oral idioms to define the individual characters as an oral storyteller might do, thus vesting both the characters and the narrative process with aspects of orality. “The Eatonville Anthology” also draws from pre-established oral tales, so that its narrative fabric is interwoven with oral tradition. Most importantly, “The Eatonville Anthology” creates a community text from a series of individual moments, defying the print plot convention of a single protagonist progressing through a single linear storyline, creating instead a composite picture and a communal text that metafictionally depicts the characters themselves participating in the creation.

In defining “The Eatonville Anthology” as a community text or community narrative, I am drawing upon and also departing from the concept of a “narrative of community” as defined in Sandra Zagarell’s essay “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre.” Zagarell defines her narratives of community primarily as texts “that take as their subject the life of a community...and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity” (499). I both expand and restrict Zagarell’s model by redefining community narratives as not only narratives that depict communities –and therefore depart structurally from single-protagonist narratives, as Zagarell also notes (503-4)– but narratives where the depicted community is conceived as a creative community whose members, in some measure, participate in the narrative construction. “The Eatonville Anthology” is also a community narrative in that it comprises individual narratives, twelve of which are
based on a single Eatonville character, creating a community in both the literal and metaphoric senses. That is, the narrative itself is parallel to the real-life community, in that embraces the narratives of individuals within its collective framework. Further, in “The Eatonville Anthology” the creative community is also a musical/oral storytelling community wherein both the characters and the reader/listeners are cast as a collective audience, bonded through the act of singing and tale telling, and producing a narrative formed by oral storytelling aesthetics.

Thus, while the use of composite or community narrative may not appear distinctly oral in itself, it draws upon the oral storytelling practice of including the audience in the act of construction, and replicates the community act of oral storytelling itself. In turn, this oral storytelling aesthetic shapes other seemingly non-oral aspects of the text as well. As previously discussed, each character’s own story within “The Eatonville Anthology” is a living moment of text, existing both in itself and as part of the larger Eatonville community narrative. This portrayal, in turn, affects the narrative’s relationship to time and history. The Eatonville sketches draw simultaneously on folkloric oral traditions, like those Hurston would later collect for the volume *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (now published as *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States*), and the real-life Eatonville community Hurston experienced as a child. So, the text itself is located both in the historical specificity of Hurston’s childhood Eatonville and the time-outside-of-time associated with the fairy and folk tale, the mythic time of “once upon a time” or “il était une fois.” By aligning simultaneously with the historical specificity of print and the ephemeral time-moment of orality, the Eatonville sketches live in the middle stylistic space between print and orality. Hurston’s text demonstrates its strong bond to the realm of oral storytelling from within the print page, where meaning resonates and reverberates within and between the words.

The oral aesthetic of “The Eatonville Anthology” is heightened when one learns the story of the work’s origins: Hurston would perform the sketches at Harlem Renaissance parties, like a witty cocktail joke or a shared song (Walker, 175). Understanding the performative possibility suggested by the text’s origins solidifies its roots in orality and performance, with their associated effects on audience: a use of voice to shift and evade the strict linearity of the print form, an evocation of a shared textual moment outside of linear time, and a creation of community bond through textual construction that takes place both within the text performed and within the moment of performance, extending to the contemporary audience and recreating the listeners as part of the Eatonville narrative community.

In this context, the sketch that interests me most, and that I will discuss for the balance of this essay, is the eleventh sketch in the collection, entitled “Double Shuffle.” One of only two sketches that does not focus on a particular character, “Double Shuffle” brings the entire Eatonville community together for a dance—a “breakdown”—that is described in significantly oral detail (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182). “Double Shuffle” is a microcosm of the text as a whole, a brief narrative moment that encapsulates the achievement of the larger narrative in its creation of a community text from a set of individual ones, and the depiction of this community as creators unto themselves.

Beyond its interest as a sketch that draws the Eatonville community together, “Double Shuffle” is also a repository of oral storytelling techniques played out within print fiction. First amongst these is the use of an inset song within the sketch. As before, it is
the oral artistic forms of music and storytelling, as well as the physical form of dance, that draw the community together, and in turn shape the aesthetics of the narrative. In “Double Shuffle,” as the Eatonville residents dance a dance called the “buck and wing,” Hurston transcribes lines of the song in verse form:

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'Me an' mah honey got two mo' days
two mo' days tuh do de buck'
(Hurston, Eatonville, 182)
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Hurston provides a full twenty lines of song text within the sketch, also including the following lines:

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Long tall angel – steppin’ down,
Long white robe an’ starry crown
(Eatonville, 183).
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This song transcription illustrates the multifaceted functions of orality in the print text. First, the use of orality is literal. An actual oral text is placed within the print text, bursting the prescriptive bounds of the text on the page through its spacing, and through its use of oral characteristics inherent to the song text, but often considered to be outside the print form. For example, the language of the song is written colloquially, in regionally and culturally specific terms, “mo’ days” rather than “more days,” “tuh” rather than “to,” and the removal of g’s and d’s and other end-stopped consonants from the ends of words like “stepping” and “and” (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182-3). The use of spoken-word conventions within the print form, particularly ones that connect disparate words and allow sounds to blend one into the next, permits the text to flow in a smooth verbal presentation, rather than a strictly articulated print style that observes precise separation of word from word and sentence from sentence. In her use of culturally-specific, African American regionalized oral language and euphonic sound-transcription, Hurston uses orality to transcend print form, and create a flowing language style that itself replicates music. Hurston’s song-text also emphasizes the physicality of the dancers through its lyrics, which suggest a dancer’s motions:

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Long tall angel – steppin’ down,
Long white robe an’ starry crown
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While numerous dances from the “buck and wing” to the “grand march” to the “double shuffle” are described in the text, these lyrics are particularly evocative of dancerly motion. One can almost picture the dancers of the text “steppin’ down” in synchronization with the lyrics. In this moment, each textual signifier (dance, music, and language) evokes the other, and the act of “steppin’ down” becomes simultaneously lyrical, choreographed, and textual. Further, since the lyrics invoke angels, the dancers themselves become the angels as they dance. In so doing, the corporeal physicality of dancing is carried over into the textual moment, creating a tension between physicality and aphysicality that applies equally to angels, fictional characters, and storytellers. Since storytellers themselves embody narrative characters as they perform them, this portrayal in Hurston’s narrative adds an additional physical component to the textual act. Through this portrayal of body, spirit, and voice as living presences in the written text, with their own aesthetics of sound and motion, Hurston creates a print style that stretches beyond itself, into the living, breathing world of the oral, and physically performed, tale.

These effects are not limited to the song-moment in “Double Shuffle.” The narration itself replicates the song style, as if the song has wafted outward into the story, restructuring the narration along melodious lines. When the dancers are described, the
narrative voice takes up the oral and physical style of the characters' voices, as so: “Feet dragged 'shlap 'shlap! to beat out the time. No orchestra needed. Round and round! Back again, parse-me-la! shlap! shlap! Strut! Strut! Seaboard! Shlap! Shlap! Tiddy bumm!” (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182). Along with the culturally and regionally specific language and enacted physicality of this narrative passage, it contains additional characteristics defining Hurston’s unique oral style. The use of fragments is particularly notable because this technique is absent from many of Hurston’s other works. In “Spunk” and “Sweat,” for example, the characters speak in an oral style, while the narrator preserves a formal, standardized diction. Yet in “The Eatonville Anthology,” Hurston allows the orality of the characters to waft outward into the narrator’s speech, as the example above demonstrates, thus reforming the entire fiction stylistically. Hurston also makes notable use of sound words like “shlap.” As I argue in my work “The Woman and the Spoken Word,” sound words transform a print text both by bringing the oral language realm to bear on the printed fiction, and also by expanding our notion of language itself. While contemporary criticism emphasizes a gap between signifier and signified in language construction, onomatopoeic moments defy the arbitrariness of language systems, creating linguistic moments where sound and meaning—and sound and text—are wholly one. Like the scat singer who uses non-linguistic vocal syllables to turn the voice into an instrument, Hurston’s usage transforms textual language into a sound-moment vested with meaning intrinsic to that sound. Thus her fiction forces the reader to reconsider language and textual construction through the moment of orality in the narration.

Like the jazz of her day, this oral-print writing style emphasizes the spontaneity of improvisation—a practical impossibility in the print form—by establishing a community of creators participating in the textual construction. The whole of Eatonville are creators of the song they sing and the dance they dance. We know that “the blind man” Lizzimore is providing organ and/or guitar accompaniment to the dancing, and that he is “assisted by any volunteer with mouth organs or accordions” (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182). As with the example that began this essay, in “Double Shuffle,” the characters that aren’t dancing are “shouting as they clap the old, old double shuffle songs” (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182). So when the song is transcribed, it is not only an oral text unto itself, but is understood to be sung by the Eatonville community. Therefore, the textual players are transformed from mere characters to coauthors of the text. The simultaneously listening and participating audience within the text parallels the audience of Hurston’s—and our—own performative moment. One could almost imagine Hurston’s own audience joining in on the designated lyrics, adding their 1920s voices to the voices of her characters in a single, unified chorus.

So, in “Double Shuffle” Hurston incorporates several elements of orality within the printed form. “Double Shuffle” brings the members of Eatonville together, taking the individual characterization from the volume’s other sketches and recasting it as community experience, and community narrative. This communal narrative is bonded through music and dance, bringing the performative and oral qualities of language to bear on the printed fiction. All of the Eatonville sketches draw on oral storytelling in their use of language, characterization, structure, and time, in order to create living, physicalized textual moments in contrast to stale and dusty written histories. Finally, all of the elements of orality within the fiction are available to the reader who is brought into the Eatonville community through the narrative style. Hurston’s writing invites us to participate, to sing and to dance and to tell stories, alongside her fictional-
historical characters, by depicting a creative community that acts simultaneously as listeners and participants.

Aside from the genius of her individual artistry, these techniques serve important cultural functions within Hurston’s historical moment. Her use of orality exemplifies the Harlem Renaissance concern with creating an art form vested in the African American experience. Her aesthetics of voice, physicality, and community strongly reflect a culture influenced by oral tradition. Again, like the jazz of the period, Hurston’s writing represents a relationship to time, language, and history that challenges white American assumptions about each of these entities through both its content and its style. Hurston’s work can also be read in relationship to the U.S.’s women regionalist writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who strove to use literature in part as a cultural artifact, preserving the folkways of their contemporaries before they are lost to a culture of increasing national consumerism and trans-regional popular culture (Frever). “The Eatonville Anthology” preserves the community structure, values, language, music, and dance of its members, not like a fossil trapped in a rock, but like a spiritual song, passed verbally through generations, altered with each voice that sings it, and also bringing to life each past voice in chorus with each new performance. As such, though “The Eatonville Anthology”’s text ends with the phrase, “Stepped on a tin, mah story ends,” the understanding that orality brings to the text is that the ending is never an ending (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 188). Through the use of orality, the text lives in the time outside time of “il était une fois,” lives in the improvisational moment of the jazz composition, and is brought to life anew with the breath of each voice that lives within it, and each new voice that performs it. While some narratives may create tension or dis-ease when combining print and orality, Hurston creates oral-print as a narrative dance: two partners with individual styles, coming together to create something new and beautiful through their collective motion. And the entire community is invited to join in.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Essays that explore orality in Their Eyes Were Watching God include, but are not limited to, Basu; Benesch; Brigham; Peters; and Vickers. Also notable is Harris’ “Performing Personae and Southern Hospitality: Zora Neale Hurston in Mules and Men,” which explores Hurston presentation of folkloric material in her fiction.

2. While I draw on sources from a range of national, regional, and cultural traditions to create my concept of the oral-print text, I am not suggesting that these techniques be understood wholly apart from their cultural contexts. Rather, I suggest that certain elements of orality are observable across a range of contexts, though they may manifest differently in each text in which they appear, with respect to culture, nation, region, socioeconomic class, gender, individual artistry, and other factors relating to identity and text. While this theory of orality is, to a degree, posited as cross-cultural, I encourage its application with credit to the cultural context of the text discussed. In Hurston’s case, though the elements of orality are similar to those seen in texts from other traditions, her firm affiliation with the Harlem Renaissance, and this movement’s emphasis on the recovery/creation of an African American cultural tradition, is very much at play in her use of an oral storytelling framework for her printed fiction.

3. An early example of this form would be The Canterbury Tales, wherein nearly every character is also a narrator of a story to the reading/listening audience, and thus a participant in the larger narrative construction. Contemporary examples could include Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, and Whitney Otto’s How to Make an American Quilt. I do not see direct narration as the only criteria for a creative community, as noted by these examples. In Otto, for example, the characters do not narrate their individual tales, but create their stories through story quilt blocks that are conveyed to the reader-listener, representing the characters as creative participants in narrative construction. Likewise, the characters in “The Eatonville Anthology” do not narrate their individual tales, but when they tell stories or sing songs that are directly conveyed to the reader/listener, they are participating in the textual construction as co-creators.

4. Chronology of Hurston’s life and texts is drawn from Russell; and Walker.

5. Hurston’s use of dance is not surprising, given that in addition to her work as a fiction writer and folklorist, she also staged dance performances and wrote plays that incorporated African American and Caribbean dance into their staging (Kraut). For detailed analysis of these texts and productions, see Kraut “Between Primitivism and Diaspora” and “Reclaiming the Body.”

6. The tension between regional and culturally specific speech and a strictly defined “standard English” narrative voice is also a major interpretative issue in Their Eyes Were Watching God. See again Brigham; and Vickers.

7. When presenting this paper in conference, the audience participated in the opening passage by collectively voicing “the last word of the line,” creating a synchronous moment with the characters of the text(s). While I do not suggest that the specifically African American community of Eatonville and of Hurston’s own performative circle is replicated by such an act, I believe that the text lends itself—indeed encourages—reperformance in the verbal realm, and that reperformance draws a correlation between the textual audiences, however disparate in time, nation, and culture.

8. Though not fully explored here, there are also moments in “Double Shuffle” that could be interpreted as cases of signifying, as it is defined by Gates, and that these oral moments also collapse the hierarchical levels of character, author, and audience as previously described. For example, “Double Shuffle” conspicuously mentions the presence of “deacons” at “the breakdown,” and goes on to relate a song lyric that states “Would not marry a preacher/Tell yuh de reason why” (Hurston, “Eatonville,” 182-3). In the moment of performance, one could read the song as signifying on the figure of the preacher to the group’s amusement, recreating him as
simultaneously the subject and the object of both the song and the story, highlighting all the intricate interweavings thereof. One can only wonder what the multifold textual effects would be if a preacher were present at Hurston’s performance of the song within the tale. Even the title “Double Shuffle” has significant implications for the creation of a simultaneous literal and metaphorical narrative project, as well as for racial identity as conveyed in text. Further scholarly exploration of “The Eatonville Anthology” may reveal more of these complex textual intersections.

ABSTRACTS

L'article étudie les rapports entre les formes orales, musicales, la danse et le texte imprimé dans un texte bref de Zora Neale Hurston, célèbre écrivain de la Renaissance de Harlem. Il s’agit de montrer que “The Eatonville Anthology”, quoique assez peu étudié par la critique par comparaison avec Their Eyes Were Watching God, œuvre plus connue du même auteur, caractérise bien l’esthétique du récit oral-écrit. Il traite particulièrement de la création, par l’auteur, d’une “communauté narrative” par l’emploi de l’oralité, et de la manière dont des textes autonomes forment un véritable ensemble narratif.

AUTHORS

TRINNA S. FREVER

Trinna S. Frever holds a Ph.D. in English specializing in women’s literature and American literature (1850 - present). A lecturer in the English department at the University of Michigan, Frever’s teaching emphasizes formal exploration of the short story and the novel. Her primary research focuses on intermedia theory, exploring the textual intersection of music, dance, architecture, film, photography, painting, oral storytelling, and print fiction. In addition to her scholarly endeavors, Frever is a fiction writer whose first collection of short fiction, Trouble with Faces, was published in December 2005.
A modern ‘seanachie’ : oral storytelling structures in Frank O’Connor’s early stories

Fabienne Dabrigeon-Garcier

The critical fame surrounding Frank O’Connor’s ground-breaking study of the short story *The Lonely Voice* (1962) has somewhat overshadowed his other achievements as novelist (*The Saint and Mary Kate*, 1932, *Dutch Interior*, 1940), translator of Old and Middle Irish poetry, modern Irish poet and some-time playwright, literary historian (*The Backward Look*, 1967) or short-story writer. O’Connor turned his attention to short fiction in the mid-1920s, probably because of his early exposure to oral storytelling in his native Co. Cork. His grandmother was an Irish-speaking peasant storyteller, and, as a young Republican during the Irish Civil war (1922-1923), he lived with a farmer’s family in an Irish-speaking village outside Macroom, Co. Cork, and came to know the celebrated Tailor of Gougane Barra, whose tales were recorded in Eric Cross’s *The Tailor and Ansty* (1970). As to *The Lonely Voice* itself, it might very well be seen as the late outcome of O’Connor’s life-long involvement in short-story writing, both as practitioner and as reader of Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, Leskov, Babel, Kipling, Maupassant, Mansfield, Coppard, Lawrence, Anderson, Hemingway, all of whom come under critical scrutiny in *The Lonely Voice*. More interestingly still, the evolution of the genre, as charted by O’Connor himself, from “primitive” storytelling (33, 45) to elaborate art-form, from public performance to the privacy of the modern short story with its “intense awareness of human loneliness” (19), can also be traced in his second short story collection, *Bones of Contention*. In most stories in this collection, not only does O’Connor’s sense of narrative seem to have been deeply affected by his early familiarity with the Irish storyteller tradition, but he casts himself in the role of the *seanachie* (the Irish for ‘a tradition bearer’) — a modern *seanachie*, aware that writing has transformed traditional oral storytelling structures and that, conversely, the written word has to be recharged with an oral narrative impulse. All the stories in *Bones of Contention* work under that double strain and achieve a variety of transitional modes, which will be examined from three different standpoints in the following article.
Among the orality structures this latter-day seanachie tries to revive, there is, to begin with, the context of oral performance—the place, time and experience shared by both teller and audience. The popular voice of the West of Ireland’s village communities—their language, social codes, belief system— is ostensibly posited as prior to writing, as the live material whose transitoriness writing attempts to commit to memory and permanence. Oral communication is prominent, even though its “aura”, its ritual function, the “hic et nunc” of original utterance, are definitively lost. What O’Connor seeks to preserve, or rather to retrieve in writing, is the subject-matter of collective experience: local events—sensational crimes preferably—as well as the highly polarised world of orality which finds its way into structures of ambiguity and duplicity, as the second part will show. A peculiar feature of oral storytelling in those early stories is the inclusion of some set pieces of Irish oral narrative, known as “runs”. “Runs” were incomprehensible ritual items, in which the verbal material—rhythm, sounds, syntactic parallels—was much more important than meaning, which was secondary and unclear. “Runs”, the third part argues, go through a series of transformations as the stories evolve, within the same collection, from tradition to modernity. Three stories will mainly come under consideration: “The Majesty of the Law”, “Peasants”, “In the Train”, and some brief reference will be made to “Orpheus and His Lute” from the same collection.

The context of oral performance

Like traditional seanachie’s tales, all three stories recount events closely connected to local history. In each of them, a crime has been committed by a member of the community and the plot is all about the community’s response to it. In “The Majesty of the Law”, a police officer ceremoniously calls upon Dan Bride to deliver a warrant to him for opening the head of a neighbour in the course of a heated argument. In “Peasants”, Michael Cronin has stolen the funds of the Carricknabreena Hurling, Football and Temperance Association, and in “In the Train”, Helena Maguire has poisoned her old husband. Whichever moment is retained in the plot, either the crime itself in “Peasants” or its after-effects in “The Majesty of the Law” and “In the Train”, the main contest is between customary law and official law. Official law is that of the state (the colonial state represented by the judiciary institutions or the police), supported by the Church in “Peasants”. It is perceived by the peasant communities as alien, hostile and inadequate. It is therefore superseded in all three stories by customary law, which conspires to shield criminals from official justice in order to avoid the dishonour cast by the guilt of one upon the entire community. For all that, criminals will not go unpunished: they will be ostracized or banished and sent to America, as customary justice will rule, without reference to any outside authority.

Not only are the local events around which the stories centre typical of community life, they are also dramatised, turned into public oral performances, thus illustrating the proximity that O’Connor detects, in The Lonely Voice, between drama and storytelling. The extratextual context shared in oral tradition by teller and audience, “the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs”, is re-established thanks to the emphasis laid on place and time, custom and body language. Place and time in all three stories jointly define the context of the oral performance. This is done in “The Majesty of the Law” in the conventional description that opens the
story, and much less conventionally in “In the Train”, where a group of villagers journey by train from Dublin to Farrenchreesht, their homeland. As the hours go by, the villagers move from compartment to compartment, so that the setting and the groups of characters change in each of the three sections as they would in the successive scenes of a play; and yet, unity of place (the train), time (the journey) and action (Helena’s crime) is altogether preserved, as in classical drama. In each section, talk is foregrounded – talk about the village, the country customs, the neighbours, human relations, and hints at the future that awaits the murderess: though she has been officially cleared of the charges against her thanks to the false evidence given by the villagers at the Dublin Criminal Courts, she will be outlawed once back in Farrenchreesht. The narrative insists on the body language, the facial expressions and vocal inflections of each character, registering dramatically the non-verbal signs of verbal communication:

“‘They might have stopped to say good evening,’ she added sharply, and her face sank into its old expression of boredom and dissatisfaction.” (586)

“‘Oh, Farranchreesht! Farranchreeest!’ cried the young woman with the haggard face, the ravaged lineaments of which were suddenly transfigured. ‘Farranchreesht and the sky over you, I wouldn’t change places with the Queen of England this night!’” (596).

However, the central element of this public oral performance is indeed the speaking voice, the characters’ and the narrator’s. In the three stories, dialogue predominates by far over narration, even though, structurally, the narrator’s voice is the enunciative frame encompassing all other utterances. The prominence granted to dialogue allows the peculiarities of oral speech to develop: the Hiberno-English vernacular, with its specific turns of phrase, idioms and proverbs, the impossible place-names, the value-code and inherited assumptions of the villagers, and, above all, the dramatization of the agonistic potential of oral utterance:

When Michael John Cronin stole the funds of the Carricknabreena Hurling, Football and Temperance Association, commonly called the Club, everyone said: ‘Devil’s cure to him!’, ‘Tis the price of him!’ ‘Kind father to him!’ ‘What did I tell you?’ and the rest of things people say when an acquaintance has got what is coming to him. (“Peasants”, 155.)

The simulation of oral peculiarities in writing is all the more successful as the narrator makes his own language echo popular speech, and mediates without any marked discontinuity between dialogue and comment, between the empathetic world of the public performance and the estrangement of the written narrative, irremediably detached from the original context of utterance. The narrator’s mediating position is most strikingly balanced between oral transmission and written transcription in the ending of “Peasants”, where he (the I-narrator) becomes the receiver of the tale and passes on the moral to be drawn from it to the anonymous (implied) audience of his own narrative:

He [the priest] has left unpleasant memories behind him. Only for him, people say, Michael John would be in America now. Only for him he would never have married a girl with money, or had it to lend to poor people in the hard times, or ever sucked the blood of Christians. For, as an old man said to me of him: ‘A robber he is and was, and a grabber like his grandfather before him, and an enemy of the people like his uncle, the policeman; and though some say he’ll dip his hand where he dipped it before, for myself I have no hope unless the mercy of God would send us another Moses or Brian Boru to cast him down and hammer him in the dust.’ (163)
The narrator retells both what the rumour said publicly and what was said to him privately; he parodies the style of genealogical litany, jocularly mixing biblical and Irish history, Moses and Brian Boru. O'Connor thus recasts the art of the seanachie in a modern mode by transforming oral storytelling structures, by enacting on the page the context of oral speech, by converting the non-verbal signs into verbal ones, which may account for the excess in writing, partly due to the amount of non-verbal matter recaptured in it. But he also brings innuendoes and subtleties into the narrator’s voice to suggest a meaning beyond the storyline, thus developing implicitness and polysemy, so peculiar to modern short story writing.

Agonism, double-speak, duplicity

Ong argues that “residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.” In oral cultures a request for information is commonly interpreted interactively as agonistic, and, instead of being really answered, is frequently parried:

“’Well, now,’ said Kendillon darkly, ’wasn’t it great impudence in her [Helena] to come back?’ ’Wasn’t it now?’ answered a woman. ’She won’t be there long,’ he added. ’You’ll give her the hunt, I suppose?’ asked Moll Mor politely, too politely. ’If no one else do I’ll give her the hunt myself.’” (“In the Train”, 596.)

The first woman parries the question with an echo-question, though the introducing verb is, inappropriately enough, “answered”; then Moll Mor, with her over-polite, sarcastic query, derides both Kendillon and the custom of “giving the hunt” which he is determined to use against the murderess. In another instance, Moll Mor recounts a short agonistic dialogue she had with the sergeant, in which she returned or eluded all the latter’s questions:

“’Have you e’er a drop, Moll?’ says he. ’Maybe I have, then,’ says I. ’What is it?’ says he. ’What do you think?’ says I. ’For God’s sake,’ says he, ’baptize it quick and call it whisky.’” (“In the Train”, 600).

Double-speak, generally characterized in oral cultures by deliberate ambiguity, obsuscation and elusiveness, is transformed into outright duplicity in the three stories. All the villagers know privately what the truth is—that their neighbours are guilty of crimes punishable by law—but, in public, they will declare untruths in order to help one of them eschew the law. “Peasants” is built on three successive confrontations of the Club Committee, who try to exonerate Michael Cronin from guilt by any means, with the priest, who wants to turn him over to the police. Each time, a new stratagem is used to divert the course of justice: first a plea to “give Michael Cronin a character” (i.e. restore his respectability to shield the parish from shame), then bribery, then blackmail. Each time, the duplicity of the Committee is laid bare by the priest.

In “In the Train”, the peasants gloat over their perjury in court, and Moll Mor is praised for having shown herself “the biggest and brazenest and cleverest liar of the lot” (598). What these instances show is the dramatization of double-speak, its transformation from a mode of interactive exchange into a plot of verbal duplicity and collective perjury. Double-speak is, according to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a historically anti-colonial pastime in Ireland:
“Irish double-speak creates intolerable levels of ambiguity, which can provoke schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals. It is suggested that this Irish expressiveness was shaped by the nearly eight hundred years of English domination and colonialism. Verbal ambiguity is a common response of a defeated people toward their conquerors – that is, never giving the master a straight answer.”

The narrator’s voice itself entertains ambiguity too, in the sense that it privileges no single point of view or discourse. In “Peasants”, neither customary law nor the priest is vindicated. Neither party is spared irony and satire. The priest turns the thief over to the police, but he himself is driven away by the hostility of his parishioners; Michael Cronin serves a short term in prison, but punishment does not produce reform: he becomes a rogue and a parasite like all of the Cronins before him, and a curse to the village. In “In the Train”, the narrator holds back information about Helena’s crime till late into the story, and even then, there are only few and scattered allusions to it, which makes it difficult for the reader to reconstruct the underlying plot. It could be said that the narrator colludes with the villagers in covering up the crime and opts instead for thrusting into the limelight the folk speech and the folk culture, making writing mimick the wiles of orality and abstain from any fixed meaning. Dissonance and tension within the text are not resolved, and no absolute or single interpretation is delivered by the off-stage narrator. “In the Train”, more than any other story, achieves a dialogic concordance of unmerged discourses: feminist revolt vs patriarchal rule, country life vs city life, conservatism vs evolution. More “modern” (in O’Connor’s sense) than any other story too, it ends with the outlawed figure of Helena Maguire and her “lonely voice” inwardly rehearsing and wondering at her gesture of rebellion:

The flame of life had narrowed in her to a pin-point, and she could only wonder at the force that had caught her, mastered her, and thrown her aside.

“No more to me,” she repeated dully to her own image in the window, “no more to me than the salt sea!” (“In the Train”) 603.

Runs, formulaic storytelling, and mnemonic patterns

An interesting case of an orality-structure adapted to short-story writing by O’Connor is the traditional “run”. Runs in the Irish oral tradition were resting-places for the storyteller. They were semi-obscure, elaborate embellishments meant to impress the listener. They were characterised by a bombastic series of alliterating adjectives, by formulaic or parallel constructions, and were recited at greater speed than the narrative proper. They were probably part of the mnemonic patterns and formulas shaped for ready oral occurrence which an oral culture uses to retrieve articulated thought.

“Orpheus and His Lute” recounts a battle between two rival popular bands in patterned rhythms and with epic bombast quite reminiscent of the runs:

‘Now, some to this day maintain that Melancholy Lane were to blame, and some say Irishtown; some say the bandmaster of the Melancholy Lane gave the order “Eyes Right” and some say ‘twas pure curiosity made his buckos turn their instruments on the Irishtown contingent. But, whatever it was, there was a roar, and the next minute the two bands were at one another’s throats, and the new uniforms that Melancholy Lane took such pride in were wiping the mud from the streets so clean you could nearly eat your dinner off it after. ‘Well, as God done it, Butty Bowman happened to have a bit of a heavy stick with him and with one lucky swipe he opened the head of a flute player and grabbed his flute. Then he made a run after the procession, and, falling into step as if nothing had happened, he struck up...
“Brian Boru’s March” on his own. And whether ‘twas the warlike sound of that or the way they were after being starved for music for a month past till they were more like hungry lions and tigers than men, the Irishtown fellows whipped off their belts and laid out all round them, and one by one they were racing after Bowman with cornets, clarinets, piccolos and trombones; and, if they were, their supporters were springing up from every quarter and falling in two deep at each side. And still the band kept running up with bleeding noses and broken heads and faces that were after being painted and decorated with mud.” (“Orpheus and His Lute” 40-41.)

This is the closest to the run in the Gaelic tradition that can be found in the collection. It goes on in this style not merely for two paragraphs as here, but for three pages, with very few marks of punctuation, florid imagery, innumerable sound effects, and formulaic turns of phrase.

Still close, but rather in the vein of a family-saga, is a genealogical piece in “Peasants”, about the Cronins and their poor reputation in the parish. The genealogy ironically boils down to a methodical list of all the black sheep in the family from time immemorial, in the tone of village gossipings, with the exaggerations and the long-winded syntax characteristic of the runs:

And not only Michael John but the whole Cronin family, seed, breed, and generation, came in for it; there wasn’t one of them for twenty miles round or a hundred years back but his deeds and sayings were remembered and examined by the light of this fresh scandal. Michael John’s father (the heavens be his bed!) was a drunkard who beat his wife, and his father before him a land-grabber. Then there was an uncle or grand-uncle who had been a policeman and taken a hand in the bloody work at Mitchelstown long ago, and an unmarried sister of the same whose good name it would by all accounts have needed a regiment of husbands to restore. It was a grand shaking-up the Cronins got altogether, and anyone who had a grudge in for them, even if it was no more than a thirty-third cousin, had rare sport, dropping a friendly word about it and saying how sorry he was for the poor mother till he had the blood lighting in the Cronin eyes. (“Peasants”, 155.)

In the last instance, taken from “In the Train”, O’Connor moves away from the oral tradition, though the form of the run is preserved in the sound echoes and modulations (“gnarled, wild”, “black sombreros”), as well as in the syntactic patterns: in each of the following four sentences, sentence-order is subverted to theatrically foreground movement (“Into the lamplight stepped a group”) or picturesqueness (“Gnarled, wild, .... they swept in”):

Into the lamplight stepped a group of peasants. Not such as one sees in the environs of a capital, but in the mountains and along the coasts. Gnarled, wild, with turbulent faces, their ill-cut clothes full of character, the women in pale brown shawls, the men wearing black sombreros and carrying big sticks, they swept in, ill-at-ease, laughing and shouting defiantly. And, so much part of their natural environment were they, that for a moment they seemed to create about themselves rocks and bushes, tarns, turf ricks and sea. (“In the Train”, 587.)

With its abundance of visual images and its mock-heroic tone, the scene suddenly brings to life an odd set of characters with their peculiarities of dress and manner; and along with them, their Western environment rushes into the picture, so strong is the organic continuity between the peasants and their natural habitat. The result is a poetic vignette, on the borderline between drama (action) and poetry (diction), between the traditional run and the modernist image, “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”
All of the stories in *Bones of Contention* are to some degree steeped in orality. From its title onwards, the collection spells out the agonistic impulse in oral culture as well as the antagonisms in contemporary Ireland at large between popular tradition and official institutions, between authority structures and the individual. At one end of a wide spectrum of transitional modes, some stories, such as “Orpheus and His Lute”, are closest to the public, ancient, art of oral storytelling, to its taste for verbal excess and dramatic invention, to its context and style of delivery (the “runs”); at the other end others, like “In the Train”, herald in the more private and elliptical art of the modern short story, “the silence of those infinite spaces” within the individual consciousness.

By cleverly poising his narrators as mediators between oral speech and written narrative, and by paring down orality structures in order to fit them into the economy of the short story, O’Connor manages to redeem in writing the waning away of a cultural icon, the old Irish tradition of oral storytelling. Ultimately, orality becomes in his early stories a strategic device to recuperate the indigenous voices of those “submerged population groups” which, as he will argue some decades later in *The Lonely Voice*, have become the hallmark of the modern short story.

NOTES


4. “Seanchai is applied as a rule to a person, man or woman, who makes a specialty of local tales, family-sagas, or genealogies, socio-historical tradition, and the like, and can recount many tales of a short realistic type about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural beings.” James H. Delargy, *The Gaelic Story-Teller*, reprinted from the Proceedings of the British Academy, XXXI (London, 1945) 6.


8. To Frank O'Connor, in The Lonely Voice and elsewhere in his criticism, the short story should ring with “the tone of a man’s voice speaking” (Lonely Voice, 29).
9. Brian Boru was a High King of Ireland in the eleventh century, who put an end to Viking domination.
10. Speaking about Leskov in The Lonely Voice, O’Connor mentions “the popular taste for excess” and for the accumulation of “marvels” (29).
11. Ong, Orality and Literacy, 43–44.
13. Delargy mentions the “ coru catha ” (“preparing for battle”) and the “ culaidh ghaisge “ (“battle-dress”) in heroic tales, which described the hero’s preparations and accoutrement prior to battle in considerable detail. The Gaelic Story-Teller 34.
14. J. M. Synge was fascinated by the formulaic run with which an old storyteller from the Aran Islands ended a tale: “They found the path and I found the puddle. They were drowned and I was found. If it’s all one to me to-night, it wasn’t all one to them the next night. Yet, if it wasn’t itself, not a thing did they lose but an old black tooth.” To Synge, it was nonsense, “gibberish”. John Millington Synge, Prose, Alan Price, ed., Collected Works, vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 120.
15. “In an oral culture, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns. (...) Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero’s helper), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall.” Ong, Orality and Literacy 33–34.
16. “ and if they were, their supporters... “, in the last but one sentence, echoes Synge’s example in note 14 above.
17. See The Lonely Voice about “the old rhetorical device of the mock-heroic” in Chekhov’s “Death of a Civil Servant”, p. 15.
18. For a standard definition of “vignette”, see Martin Gray, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (Harlow: Longman Group, 1992): “the word applies to descriptive passages in prose works which resemble little pictures.” (p. 301).
20. O’Connor repeatedly refers in The Lonely Voice to Pascal’s “the eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me” to express the art of ellipsis, of suggestion and intensity that is constitutional of the short story.

ABSTRACTS

Plus connu comme auteur de The Lonely Voice, son étude de la nouvelle qui fit date dans les années 60, Frank O’Connor débuta comme nouvelliste fortement influencé par la tradition du conte oral, encore très vivace dans les années 20-30 dans l’ouest de l’Irlande dont il est originaire. Son deuxième recueil de nouvelles, Bones of Contention (1936), s’intéresse aux motifs de conflit.

AUTHORS

FABIENNE DABRIGEON-GARCIER

In his pioneering and extremely influential study *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Walter J. Ong drew attention to the radical changes which are experienced by predominantly oral cultures when they develop writing and have access to print. He emphasized how the shift from “primary orality” to “secondary orality” not only implies that cultures are compelled to elaborate new rhetorical styles in order to communicate knowledge by employing a different medium; the shift also involves a major transformation of thought itself. According to Ong, orally based thought and expression are additive rather than subordinative; aggregative rather than analytic; redundant, conservative, close to the human lifeworld, agonistically toned, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; homeostatic and situational rather than abstract (36-57).

When trying to throw further light on the dichotomy between oral and literate cultures, anthropologists have often used a series of contrastive terms by which each of the two cultures has been associated to the following binary oppositions: subjectivity vs. objectivity, concreteness vs. abstract thought, immediate presence vs. historical perspective, and context dependency or closeness vs. objectivizing distance. More specifically, this list was prolonged whenever oral art forms were compared with written ones, because the former tended to be labeled primitive, old-fashioned and rural, whereas the latter were generally characterized as civilized, modern and urban. As a result, oral traditions were either excluded from the field of literature or, at best, if they were taken into account, were invariably less valued than written ones. However, current trends in literary studies are revising and questioning these distinct dichotomies, pointing out that they constitute overly simple categorizations of complex phenomena. For instance, starting in the early 1970s, Ruth Finnegan’s extensive research on African narratives, and subsequently on oral poetry worldwide, has continually rejected this kind of stereotypical thinking about the relationships between oral and written modes by systematically exposing the hybrid nature of a number of texts which resist such polarizations. A thorough analysis of the main features of contemporary works of oral literature leads to the conclusion that orality is
not merely the antithesis of writing, and that both modes of communication are entwined rather than separate.1 The very notion that cultures evolve from orality to literacy, as if they were successive stages in a single path of cultural evolution, is disallowed by the plain fact that writing does not extinguish oral cultural transmission. As Walter J. Ong noted, “writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it” (9).

Among the contemporary authors who have made significant contributions to the Orality-Literacy Debate, Thomas King deserves special recognition, for he has participated in it by dealing with these issues both theoretically and practically. Indeed, throughout his essays and lectures he devotes a great deal of attention to elucidating how the oral and the written may be fruitfully linked in literature, at the same time that his fiction provides excellent examples of written orality. Furthermore, King’s interest in the modern multi-media forms of oral cultural transmission is exemplified by his scripts for films, television and radio drama, in particular by his extensive involvement with The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour, a popular CBC radio series, for which he wrote the parts played by himself and two other actors.2 This provocative and rather controversial radio program, featuring a mixture of hilarious social comedy and scathing political satire, allowed a very wide audience to listen to and be struck by King’s own powerful voice.4

Taken as a whole, King’s oeuvre demonstrates the falsity of certain preconceived ideas about orality, such as the assumption that it is a conservative phenomenon. In his novels, short stories, lectures, screen and radio scripts, and even in his radio-acting performances, he constantly resorts to orality in order to support progressive political views and to question reactionary ideologies. Whenever he associates the written traditions of European cultures with the discourse of the colonizer, and the Native North-American oral traditions with the discourse of the colonized, he proves that, far from being conservative, orality may be used as a liberating mode of resistance to written colonial narratives, in the sense that Homi Bhabha contended (444-45). In his fiction, King has given ample evidence of the destabilizing potential of orality to counter colonialist impositions. Partly grounded in spoken sources, King’s novels3 and short stories establish a constant dialogue between oral and textual traditions that parodies master-narratives, and subverts the conventions created by the dominant discourse. When King was interviewed by Constance Rooke in 1990, he clarified his position in this respect:

I do feel an affinity with other aboriginal people, and the Maori in New Zealand and the Aboriginal in Australia, for instance, in part because I think that our experience with colonization is similar, but more because we seem to be concerned about the same things. ... I’ve just finished [Patricia] Grace’s Potiki which is about a Maori community. It touches on some of the same things that I like to write about, and many of the storytelling techniques, the characters, and the voices are familiar.4

Oral discursive modes have helped King not only to speak to Native communities persuasively, but also to make the voices of such communities heard by a broad non-Native audience, forcefully expressing their present-day concerns about racial discrimination and stereotyping, among many other topics that still have a bearing on modern Native life on today’s Canadian reserves and in urban centers as well.5 King himself has recently stated about the thematic focus of his storytelling that his stories are “about broken treaties, residential schools, culturally offensive movies, the appropriation of Native names, symbols, and motifs” (The Truth About Stories 62).
In the discussions about orality and literacy, King aligns himself with those who emphasize continuity and blending rather than disconnection and opposition. Consequently, he rejects the notion that Native North-American oral literature exclusively pertains to the past and, on the contrary, he is particularly keen on emphasizing its present vitality. Thus, in his Introduction to *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, he remarks: “There is a misconception that Native oral literature is an artifact, something that vanished as an art form in the last [the nineteenth] century. Though virtually invisible outside a tribal setting, oral literature remains a strong tradition and is one of the major influences on many Native writers” (xii). One of such writers is precisely Thomas King, who describes himself at the end of his anthology as “a Native writer of Cherokee, Greek, and German descent” (217). Throughout his own novels and short stories, King has strived to make Native oral literature visible outside tribal settings, and has strengthened it by turning some traditional forms of oral storytelling into publishable written texts of modern fiction. One of his principal aims is to keep this kind of literature well alive by adapting, developing and enriching it, rather than trying to preserve it as if it were a relic. Most of his own creative efforts are directed at ensuring that the oral and the written may successfully merge in his literary works. His merit has been to achieve considerable popular and critical renown at national and international levels while always being faithful to the essence of his sources of inspiration.

Thomas King has often referred to his lifelong interest in oral storytelling. He recalls that he was a boy who particularly liked to listen to stories when he was growing up in a small town in Northern California, within a mixed community of Cherokees, Greeks and Italians, all of whom have ancient storytelling traditions (Moore E-8). Much later, he would also listen to Blackfoot and Cree storytellers over the ten years he spent teaching in the Native Studies Department at the University of Lethbridge, which is close to the largest reserve in Canada (Gzowski 71-72). But oral storytelling has not simply been a hobby for Thomas King. Long before he settled in Canada, he began to do scholarly research on it when he was still a university student in the United States, so that eventually it became his main field of professional expertise. His PhD dissertation, which he presented in 1986 at the University of Utah, was entitled “Inventing the Indian: White Images, Native Oral Literature, and Contemporary Native Writers.” In his abstract, he pointed out that “in the second half of the twentieth century, Native writers began going to Native culture, particularly to oral literature for inspiration, drawing from the vast body of oral stories relationships that described the world as many tribes understood it” (1729). Furthermore, he alluded to “the growing awareness of the potential of oral literature in fiction and the increasing use that Native writers have made of this body of literature in their novels.”

Curiously enough, in spite of King’s direct exposure to oral Native storytelling, his chief influence in this sense does not come from actually listening to spoken words, but from reading a transcription, a printed text. In an interview, King explained that he “was blown away” when he became acquainted with the stories of Harry Robinson, an Okanagan elder skilled both in English and in his mother tongue (Gzowski 72). It has been noted that King only read the printed version of Robinson’s stories which the ethnographer Wendy Wickwire had sent him, and that he never met the storyteller, nor did he take the audio tapes which Wickwire offered him (Chester 59). At the time, King was editing the anthology *All My Relations*, and was simultaneously working on...
what he likes to call “voice pieces,” where he, in his own words, “was trying to recreate the sense of an oral storytelling voice in a written form” (qtd. in Gzowski 72). For twelve years, Wendy Wickwire had been recording and transcribing the stories that Harry Robinson had told her in English, a selection of which she finally published in 1989 in the volume entitled Write It On Your Heart. The following year, when King brought out All My Relations, he dedicated it to Harry Robinson, who had recently passed away (1900-1990).

Since then, King has not ceased to pay homage to the man who became inspirational for him (Gzowski 72). In his Introduction to All My Relations, King remarked that, “In a written story, you only have the word on the page. Yet Robinson is able to make the written word become the spoken word by insisting, through his use of rhythms, patterns, syntax, and sounds, that his story be read out loud, and, in so doing, the reader becomes the storyteller” (xii-xiii). The specific text chosen by King to represent Robinson’s work in the anthology (1-26) is cited in its Introduction as “a fine example of interfusional literature, literature that blends the oral and the written” (xii).

Interfusional literature is one of the four terms which Thomas King has suggested to describe the range of Native writing in North America, together with tribal, polemical and associational. In his article “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” (1990) he defines all four in detail, and includes under the heading of interfusional literature the narratives that are written down in English and adapted for wide circulation, but retain the typical Native voice of the storyteller as well as traditional themes and oral discursive devices. King observes that, although there are other authors (such as Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes and Howard Norman) whose works in translation “suggest the nature of interfusional literature,” Harry Robinson’s Write It On Your Heart is “the only complete example we have” of it (244). According to King, “The stories in Robinson’s collection are told in English and written in English, but the patterns, metaphors, structures as well as the themes and characters come primarily from oral literature” (244). King praises Robinson for being “successful in creating an oral voice,” something he does in “a rather ingenious way,” for he develops “an oral syntax that defeats readers’ efforts to read the stories silently to themselves, a syntax that encourages readers to read the stories out loud” (244). King commends Robinson’s prose for avoiding the loss of what is generally omitted when oral literature is translated, and for “re-creating at once the storyteller and the performance” (244). In “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” the last comment about interfusional literature constitutes an explicit acknowledgment of King’s literary debt to the Okanagan storyteller, for the author concludes the essay with the following statement about Robinson: “his prose has become a source of inspiration and influence for other Native writers such as Jeannette Armstrong and myself” (245).

King also declared his enthusiasm for Robinson’s stories during an interview held in 1990, the same year that both the anthology All My Relations and the essay “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” were published. On this occasion, apart from reiterating the features which he found particularly attractive in Robinson’s art, King summarized the elder’s achievement with the words: “The key to Robinson’s literature is that he knows both languages and he understands storytelling” (qtd. in Rooke). This observation reveals that, although Thomas King cannot speak any Native language, he is aware of the importance of bilingualism in the shaping of contemporary Native literature. In fact, whenever he casts himself in the role of the traditional storyteller, he sounds as if he were bilingual, because he deliberately replicates the mother-tongue interferences that
appear in the typical English speech of Native elders, paying particular attention to lexical choice. For instance, he slips in some words in Native languages, mispronounces certain English names (generally with a humorous intent), and applies the personal pronouns he, she, it, and they indiscriminately, instead of making them consistent with their antecedents. Additionally, he privileges exhortatory or phatic forms of address, by which the narrator apostrophizes readers directly, using the second person, you, as if they were a cooperative listening audience whose active participation and interaction was being encouraged, so as to give the impression that they are attending a collective performance. The author also adopts a style of presentation which is meant to render on the page the specific nuances of the Native storytellers’ common verbal rhythms. As a result, his rhetorical strategies include intentional digressions, lists and repetitions (which function as mnemonic devices), frequent pauses and hesitations (e.g. “Ummmm, ummmm, ummmm,” or “Maybe. Maybe not. Can’t say”), expressions of laughter (e.g. “Hahahahaha,” or “Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha”), elision of verbs, extremely brief sentences, punctuation and line breaks that echo storytelling cadences, together with parataxis, illustrated by a striking proliferation of juxtaposed declarative statements in contrast with an almost complete absence of subordination. This narrative mimicking is intended to reproduce a sense of the syntax, tone and diction that characterizes the English speech of Natives while avoiding the undesirable implications of dialect to which King alluded when he said to one of his interviewers: “I also try to stay away from dialect. Dialect creates centres ... I think of that as a responsibility not to show Native people as illiterate or stupid, because dialect has that tendency ...” (qtd. in Rooke)

Both in his novels and in his short fiction, King has resorted to imitating the narrative voices of traditional Native storytellers a number of times. However, he has been careful not to exploit this artifice too often or for too long. For instance, out of the ten short stories he included in his collection One Good Story, That One (1993), only four are told by a narrative voice which evokes those of such storytellers. They are entitled: “One Good Story, That One” (1988), “Magpies” (1989), “The One About Coyote Going West” (1989) and “A Coyote Columbus Story” (1992, 1993). Their placement as the first, third, sixth and ninth stories in the volume may not be purely accidental, but intended to avoid the monotony that a homogeneous distinctive voice might have caused. Unlike the other six stories of the collection (in which quotation marks are used to clearly indicate dialogue), these four stories are presented as if they were transcriptions intended to offer the stories exactly as told, avoiding all quotation marks. Out of the four stories, the one in which the narrative voice most resembles that of Harry Robinson is the first, and the one after which the whole volume is titled. The cheerful narrator of “One Good Story, That One” is a fictional Native storyteller who pokes fun at three anthropologists by telling them a distorted version of the biblical episode of Adam and Eve instead of the “authentic” creation story they wanted to record. The story exemplifies King’s use of subversive humor, which is not merely intended to amuse for the sake of provoking laughter, but handled in the sense that Paula Gunn Allen once remarked on when questioned about Native joking: “humor is the best and sharpest weapon we’ve always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation. And while it is a tiny projectile point, it’s often sharp, true and finely crafted” (qtd. in Lincoln 7). This particular story comically deals with the controversial issues of authenticity and cultural appropriation by recalling how the voices of traditional storytellers have regularly been mediated in anthropological studies whose
authors felt free to record and translate everything they wished, with no respect for
the patrimonial restrictions of Native communities.\textsuperscript{13}

The oral discursive devices used throughout “One Good Story, That One” are not simply
decorative, but perform the important functions of both characterizing its narrator as a
realistically portrayed traditional Native storyteller (whose voice sounds “authentic” or
genuine), and highlighting some of the most polemic matters of contention in the
debates about Native oral literature. Apart from the two aspects mentioned above
(authenticity and cultural appropriation), King’s mock creation story bears on the
problems of authority posed by the oral vs. the written modes of expressing
worldviews. The authority of the book of Genesis is irreverently challenged by King
when his narrator departs from the written version by changing the well-known plot,
introducing anachronisms, and mispronouncing the names of Adam and Eve, which he
renders as Ah-damn and Evening. This questioning of authority is not gratuitous, but
seems to be aimed at making readers understand why Native communities feel
offended whenever a story they hold as sacred is treated with the same kind of
carelessness, lack of respect or ineptitude by curious strangers.

In the first of the Massey lectures, which Thomas King delivered in 2003 and later
published under the title of \textit{The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative},\textsuperscript{14} he contrasted
the oral with the written modes of storytelling by opposing the different strategies he
employed to tell two creation stories: the story of the Woman Who Fell from the Sky
and that of Adam and Eve. On this occasion he did not distort the biblical story, which
he had also derided in his novel \textit{Green Grass, Running Water} (38-41), but according to his
own words he “tried to maintain a sense of rhetorical distance and decorum” (22). He
concluded his comparison between the narrative techniques he had adopted to present
the two creation stories by pointing out that “in the Native story, the conversational
voice tends to highlight the exuberance of the story but diminishes its authority, while
the sober voice in the Christian story makes for a formal recitation but creates a sense
of veracity” (23).

When Thomas King develops \textit{trickster discourse}\textsuperscript{15} throughout his fiction, he brings out a
multiplicity of conversational voices that “highlight the exuberance” of his stories,
avoid solemnity, and challenge monolithic authority. King’s stories are genuine “voice
pieces,” that is, hybrid texts which have undergone the process of transforming oral/
aural speech into the visual figuration that readers see when they look at a printed
page. As a result, such stories emphasize the acoustic dimension of language, make the
audience aware of the fact that sounds have been captured in print form, and call for a
conscious “phonemic reading” which, according to Garrett Stewart, “has not to do with
reading orally, but with aural reading” (2).

If writers incorporate orality into their writings, readers are expected to include
aurality within their readings. The ability to easily prompt aural reading is one of the
most prominent features of Thomas King’s latest collection of short fiction: \textit{A Short
History of Indians in Canada} (2005). Its title story—which was first published in 1997 and
later chosen to represent King’s literary art when the scholarly journal \textit{Canadian
Literature} devoted an entire issue to the study of his oeuvre (Summer/Autumn 1999)—
provides an excellent example of what a “voice piece” is. The story begins abruptly:

\begin{quote}
Can’t sleep, Bob Haynie tells the doorman at the King Edward.
Can’t sleep, can’t sleep.
First time in Toronto?
Yes.
\end{quote}
Businessman?
Yes.
Looking for some excitement?
Yes.
Bay Street, sir, says the doorman.

In “A Short History of Indians in Canada” there is no detailed description of the setting, no authorial comment, and report is reduced to a minimum. Out of the four narrative modes, speech prevails.\textsuperscript{17} And, in spite of the absence of quotation marks, speech here is always direct speech, not reported speech. After the voices of the businessman and the doorman, whose dialogues begin and close this circular story, we also hear the voices of Bill and Rudy talking with the businessman, all three engaged in a conversation interspersed with a number of sounds which are essential to understanding the plot, and which are rendered by various kinds of onomatopoeia: “Smack!” “Whup!” “Honk!” “Flip.” In this short story, as in many others contained in the same volume, oral features function as narrative techniques that have been chosen by the author in order to deliberately promote more active, cooperative, or communal ways of reading/listening.

The idea that orally transmitted stories are works of collective creativity produced by an expectant audience engaged in group dynamics, rather than homogeneous and static products belonging to individual authors, comes back again and again throughout King’s five Massey lectures. Each of them begins with a slightly different telling of the same story, supposedly recited within a different context, a device which draws attention to the plasticity of oral storytelling. And each of the lectures ends with a direct address by which the members of the audience are encouraged to actively do something with the stories they have received. Throughout The Truth About Stories, King declares his belief that storytellers are not alone, but in close relationship with their responsive listeners or readers, upon whom they must make an impact. This is exactly the task he decided to undertake when he adopted the oral patterns of narration which characterize traditional Native storytelling in order to write much of his short fiction.

His own remark about Harry Robinson in “The Voice and the Performance of the Storyteller” can also be applied to King himself: “In reading Robinson, one is virtually forced to read the story out loud, thereby closing the circle, the oral becoming the written becoming the oral” (C-7). Since King has experimented with “voice pieces” so successfully, his written orality has become an effective tool of communication to accurately portray members of today’s Native communities, affirm their thriving cultures and contribute to the renewal of their identity in contemporary Canada.

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NOTES

1. Since it has not been widely accepted, I am hesitant to use the word orature, coined in the 1970s by the late Ugandan linguist and literary critic Pio Zirimu because of the oxymoronic nature of the term “oral literature.”
2. Medicine River was turned into a television movie which pokes fun at stereotypical images of “Hollywood Indians.” In the fifteen-minute radio shows of The Dead Dog Café, the roles of the two main characters, the “Indians” Jasper Friendly Bear and Gracie Heavy Hand, were played by Edna Rain and Floyd Favel Starr (a Cree playwright from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan), while Thomas King—starring as himself—performed as the show’s “straight man” who was the constant butt of jokes from the other two. The recordings are available on audio cassettes published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
3. Since Thomas King conceives his novels as short-story cycles, much of what is said about his short fiction can also be applied to his longer works of fiction. For a detailed analysis of the dialogues between oral and textual traditions in Green Grass, Running Water, see James Allison Gray’s “Between Voice and Text.”
4. For an analysis of the oral features of Patricia Grace’s literary production, see Peter Dickinson’s “Orality in Literacy: Listening to Indigenous Writing.”
5. Although King often shuns the role of spokesman for Native people, he is widely acclaimed as one of the best-known Canadian writers of Native descent, together with Tomson Highway.
6. When he discussed the label of “Canadian Native author,” while acknowledging that he was not born in Canada and that the Cherokee are not a Canadian tribe, he remarked: “I think of myself as a Native writer and a Canadian writer” (qtd. in Lutz 107). In another interview, King said about his mixed heritage: “Greek was the assumed, the given identity. Indian was the mystery, the unknown self” (qtd. in Homel J-4).
7. In his Introduction to All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction, Thomas King explains how Native storytellers, by becoming bilingual, “have created both a more pan-Native as well as a non-Native audience” (ix).
8. The beginning of King’s “One Good Story, That One” exemplifies some of these rhetorical strategies: “Alright. You know, I hear this story up north. Maybe Yellowknife, that one, somewhere. I hear it maybe a long time. Old story this one. One hundred years, maybe more. Maybe not so long either, this story” (One Good Story 3).
9. In “The One About Coyote Going West” the narrator discusses storytelling with Coyote. Among differences between the two versions of “A Coyote Columbus Story,” perhaps the most striking is that the one published as a children’s book in 1992 does not present the voice of the Native traditional narrator who tells an embedded story in the version included in the collection One Good Story, That One (1993). In the second version, which is more complex than the one addressed
to a young audience, King specifically uses such a voice in order to undermine the written authority of books about Christopher Columbus.

10. Since the intercalated stories are not in the chronological order in which they appeared when they were published in periodicals between 1985 and 1992, perhaps the author or the editor purposely refrained from locating them together.

11. For a more detailed analysis of how this short story comically exposes the manner in which most Native communities perceive the predatory nature of many anthropological studies, see Gibert, 71-73. On the humor of this story, see Atwood.

12. In *The Truth About Stories*, King refers to the problem of authenticity within the context of Native identity: “In the past authenticity was simply in the eye of the beholder. Indians who looked Indian were authentic. Authenticity only became a problem for Native people in the twentieth century” (54).

13. In a 1993 interview, King said: “I have no patience with the anthropological approach to literature” (Wood 1-E).

14. An abridged version of these lectures on audio CD has been published by the CBC (ISBN 0660190486).

15. On the concept of “trickster discourse” see Gerald Vizenor.

16. Stewart contends that even the so-called “silent reading” is an acoustic event, for the act of reading itself stresses the play between “graphotext” and “phonotext,” that is, between “the scriptive character processed by the eye and phonemic characters evoked for the inner or outer ear” (4).

17. Speech is the predominant narrative mode even in King’s first novel, *Medicine River*, where direct speech is indicated by a conventional use of quotation marks. King referred to his reliance on dialogue in his fiction when he told Jace Weaver: “I like to hear my characters talking. I like to hear their voices” (56-57).

ABSTRACTS

Les structures narratives orales qui caractérisent le conte traditionnel des Peuples Premiers Canadiens constituent un trait distinctif de la fiction brève de Thomas King. Sa remarque à propos du très respecté conteur Okanagan, Harry Robinson – qui maîtrise à la fois l’anglais et sa langue maternelle- peut s’appliquer aussi à lui-même : “Lorsqu’on lit Robinson, on est pratiquement forcé de le faire à voix haute, bouclant ainsi la boucle, l’oral devenant écrit qui devient oral.” Fondées en partie sur des sources orales, les nouvelles de King instaurent un dialogue constant entre les traditions orale et écrite qui parodie les grands récits et subvertit les conventions imposées par le discours dominant.

Parmi les stratégies narratives choisies par l’auteur, on notera l’emploi de certaines tournures les plus courantes des Anciens Indigènes, et l’adoption d’un style de présentation qui vise à rendre sur la page les nuances caractéristiques des cadences orales des conteurs (ex. les digressions intentionnelles, les listes et répétitions, les pauses fréquentes, l’élision des verbes, les phrases extrêmement brèves, une ponctuation et des retours à la ligne qui recréent les rythmes du conte, ainsi que la parataxe). Dans sa fiction brève King expérimente avec succès des “morceaux vocaux” et son oralité écrite devient un véritable moyen de communication qui dresse un portrait précis des membres des communautés indigènes d’aujourd’hui, affirme l’essor de leur culture et contribue au renouveau de leur identité au sein du Canada contemporain.
AUTHORS

TERESA GIBERT

Teresa Gibert is Professor of English at the Spanish National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Madrid, Spain, where she is Head of the Department of Foreign Languages and teaches courses on American and Canadian literature. She is the author of American Literature to 1900 (2001) and Literatura Canadiense en Lengua Inglesa (2004). Prof. Gibert’s work on Thomas King includes the essays “Narrative Strategies in Thomas King’s Short Stories” (Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), and “Thomas King’s Reinvention of ‘Indian’ Space” (in press).
Storykeepers: circling family voice in stories by Thomas King, Olive Senior, Alistair Macleod and Guy Vanderhaeghe

Laurie Kruk

1 Asked to explain how he begins a new short story, Canadian author Jack Hodgins emphasized the role of storyteller, declaring “the voice is the story” (Kruk Voice 156). My interest is in the remarkable ability of four Canadian writers—King, MacLeod, Senior, Vanderhaeghe—to evoke the spoken word on the page through first-person narrators, often creating what I call the “double voice”: narratively, linguistically, culturally. Drawing on Bakhtin’s illumination of the fictional strategy of “double-voicing” as a means of creating meaningfully “dialogized” narratives, I will examine how these writers create orality effects that undermine dominant discourses, especially those of gender, nationality, ethnicity and class. My first question is, who is speaking, and why? Alistair MacLeod addresses focalization when he explains, “I just think about the story and the question I ask myself is, ‘Who gets to tell the story?’ Because that changes everything...” (Kruk Voice 168). In literature, “voice” can initially be defined simply as “the verbal characteristics of the narrator, the one who speaks” (Frye et al), but always trailing a complicating tie, according to Bakhtin, to the “speaking consciousness” with “a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones” (Bakhtin Dialogic 434). Bakhtin’s interpretation suggests a complication of voice by an author, whether biographical or implied, and that consequently, the operation of ideology within fictional voice is inevitable. Going beyond a formalist study of the narrator’s role, I would like to ask, what is the speaker’s (peculiarly Canadian?) relation to dominant cultural discourses? And how is the speaker involved in collaborative family narratives of self/subjectivity? In what ways do these voices “redraw” family circles, politically speaking?

2 So (as King’s storyteller would begin), how can a short story “keep” the quality of voiced “orality” on the page, post-poststructuralist debate about signs and signifiers?
And how are these constructed voices the outcomes of differently compelling family arrangements? King, Senior, MacLeod, Vanderhaeghe echo aspects of the "psychodynamics of orality," as Walter J. Ong puts it, within stories which foreground storytelling voices performing rhetorically for constructed auditors. In order to shape both performance and audience, each speaker defines a different "family circle," from widest to narrowest scope. The authors' shared success at creating first-person voices which appear to undermine, while paradoxically supporting, textuality, reflects views of "family" not unrelated to the culture of primary orality, with its view of speech as sacred and narrative as foundational to human existence. First, and most expansively, family may be redefined as "the relations" which are omnipresent in King's controversial trickster tale, "A Columbus Coyote Story," which originally wore the "sheep's clothing" of an illustrated children's book. Second, family embraces the community of neighbours addressed by Senior's street-prophet Isabella Francina Myrrella ("You Think I Mad, Miss?"). MacLeod invokes ancestry by encompassing five generations with his tale in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun," while Vanderhaeghe draws us into the contemporary nuclear family's "Cages," focusing particularly on the triangle of "Pop" and his two sons, Gene and Billy Simpson.

All four authors may also be brought together as writers of "realist" fiction, although with qualifications. Teresa Gibert argues for King's blending of "realism with "myth" into "magic realism," a term which may call for even more qualifications. And in a lengthy interview with Charles H. Rowell, Senior makes this observation: "Though most of my writing is in a realistic vein, I am conscious at all times of other possibilities lurking just beyond consciousness, of the great ineffable mystery that lies at the core of each life, at the heart of every story" (484). As well, King and Senior may be joined as subjects of a "postcolonial" reading, or a reading that foregrounds the cultural politics of Natives in Canada, a "settler/invader" colony, as some would define it, and the cultural and linguistic subordination of the Jamaican Creole like Senior who is "racially and socially a child of mixed worlds, socialized unwittingly and simultaneously into both" (Rowell 481). As writers and subjects King and Senior both enact multiple "border crossings." First, each is ambiguously situated in terms of Canadian literary citizenship: King, a dual-citizen of both Canada and America, is a mixed-blood man who identifies himself as a Native writer and Senior is a self-exiled writer living in Toronto but memorializing Jamaica in her fiction and poetry. Despite different points of origin, both King and Senior present counter-hegemonic perspectives from the indigenous and the marginalized, disrupting the "monologic" writing voice and modernist short story with the creation of multiple story-creators, as in King and the appearance of obsessive re-telling (with a difference), as in Senior. In both stories, the storyteller's gender is similarly marginalized—feminine, for Senior or unknown for King. Gaps in the reader's implied understanding open up silences which resonate with other voices, other linguistic and social systems that test the boundaries of imperialistic "Englishness". Their writing highlights the hybrid nature of communication, revealing different kinds of authority behind what appears, in King's case, to be an extended "joke" on a non-Native audience, or a testifying, in Senior's, to an act of ostracism which demands a new hearing in Creolized English. Thus each story interrogates the power of dominant cultural discourse (the history textbook, medicine, law, the state—standard English itself) and so offers what Davidson, Walter and Andrews cleverly call "an alterna(rra)tive" (5).
King’s “A Coyote Columbus Story” was written in response to the quincentennial of the Columbus expedition to the Caribbean in 1992 (Davis 59), and by metonymic extension, to North America or the “New World.” King himself calls this a “voice piece” meant to be “read aloud” (Davis 50, 51) and as a result, it works as a deliberate attempt to revise dominant discourse in terms of conceptual structure as well as overt content. However, as Sharon Bailey points out, analyzing Green Grass, Running Water, King’s most-discussed text, King foregrounds the opposition between oral and written authority, undermining the latter but yet inscribing the oral within texuality. King’s texts “work to conflate the oral and written modes, and function, in effect, as ‘hybrid’ works” (Davidson, Walton and Andrews 110). Drawing on his research on canonized Native storytellers such as Harry Robinson, King creates a storyteller voice that remembers, he says, that “his audience was a part of the story” (Davis 50). The importance of audience suggests King’s use of “associational” to describe the type of Native literature that treats the community largely for its “insiders,” rather than non-Native “outsiders.”

The audience is thus immediately drawn into the text as auditor—“You know, Coyote came by my place the other day”, the story begins—and there shares space with Coyote, the implied listener within the narrative frame that precedes the parody of the Columbus narrative. Coyote is stopped from happily attending a “party” for Columbus, the “one who found America” (and Indians) and “We” are invited to the teller’s kitchen table for a different teaching:

“Sit down, I says. Have some tea. We’re going to have to do this story right. We’re going to have to do this story now.
It was all old Coyote’s fault, I tell Coyote, and here is how the story goes. Here is what really happened.
So.” (124).

The narrative frame actually implies a series of such tellings, gesturing to a community still knit together by storykeeping, reminiscent of Ong’s primary orality culture. Indeed, both history book and map, products of a chirographic culture—and later, the television and computers Columbus’s men seek, 126--are negatively compared to the storytelling as a “doing.” King’s storyteller remains anonymous (ungendered, unhistoricized) yet this voice is authoritative within a cultural context of Native storytelling, as adapted by King. This authority is partly based on what we as educated readers would recognize as the deliberate absence of English “literariness”—for instance, the story’s “seemingly plotlessness” and solecisms (Davis 51). Defining speech tics such as grammatical errors (“I says”), phatics and connectors (“So” and “Well,”), simple sentence structure and weighted pauses help to remind us, when read aloud, of aspects of the “psychodynamics of orality.” One stock phrase, “I can tell you that” acts as a statement of veracity, almost of testifying, enhancing the illusion of the storyteller’s communally responsive voice.

Coyote as listener is drawn into the story in the guise of Old Coyote, the ancestor, who replays the canonical Eurocentric story, but from the other side. King here uses parody as a form of double-voicing where “parody introduces into [the imperialist discourse] a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one” (Bakhtin, Problems 193). The Indians are “created” first, as friends for baseball-playing Coyote, who eventually drives them off by not playing by “the rules,” rules which are admittedly flexible in Coyote’s usage. This is a violation of friendship, they say, reminding us that in the Native version of discovery-as-creation, the emphasis “is on family and friendship, not on domination and division” (Davidson, Walton, Andrews 82). Almost out of boredom,
trickster/creator Coyote “dreams up” the Italian explorer, marked out as Other with his “red hair” and “silly clothes,” his men and his three famous ships. King’s critique of European proto-capitalism is sharp, as the explorers care only for things to sell, leaping from 15th to 20th century in a breath (actually, paragraph break): “Yes, they says, where is the gold?/... silk cloth?/... portable colour televisions?/... home computers?” (125-26). Their comically insatiable greed finally turns the Indians themselves into commodities. The Europeans act “as if they have no relations,” or in King’s own interpretation of pan-Indian values, “they’re not responsible to that larger and extended [family] group” (Davis 61). This is the final example of “bad manners”, but still appears only as a “joke” to Coyote, who laughs until she is out of playmates (except for some “blue jays”). The Indians are sold and Columbus becomes rich and famous. Then the narrator returns as teacher to underscore the point to Coyote (and us) that “those things [America, Indians] were always here. Those things are still here today” and “that’s the truth. I can tell you that”(129). Besides, in a final joking inversion which collapses academic distinctions between cultures, the “big red History book” (123) that contained the other version was probably written by Coyote, to start with.

Senior’s “You Think I Mad, Miss?” also enacts historical revision, through the specific history of the “mad” woman, Isabella Francina Myrtella Jones, whose angry voice accosts us in ten different passages addressed to townspeople, driving through the downtown area she haunts like a Caribbean Cassandra. This monologue mixes Jamaican patois/patwa with Standard English in a hybridized construction that “actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems” (Bakhtin Dialogic 304-5). In her Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage, Senior explains: “Standard English belongs to academic and formal experience, Patwa belongs to everything else. Quite unconsciously, Jamaican speakers move between the two, using modified versions of each in order to meet the subtle demands of topic, audience and situation (what linguists call ‘code switching’).” Isabella participates in this “code switching,” making her narrative inevitably “double-voiced,” especially if considered as a Jamaican speech act called “tracing,” through which “the tracer projects him/herself into the public eye and demands some form of recognition and validation” (Simpson 839).

This story also begins with an address to the second person listener but “you” as narratee is a shifting position:

“You think I mad, Miss? You see me here with my full head of hair and my notebook and pencil, never go out a street without my stockings straight and shoes shine good for is so my mother did grow me. Beg you a smalls, nuh? Then why your face mek up so?” (75)

We develop a picture of a homeless woman, living on handouts, highly aware of her self-presentation—of gender propriety and social independence—who proudly denies the begging she will resort to in a moment. Her primary concern is with getting her version of the story out, while refusing to inhabit the abject “fallen woman” position. The forceful nature of her lament makes this clear: formerly an aspiring teacher, “Isabella was dragged down” by charming cad Jimmy Watson, who left her, pregnant and unmarried, for rival Elfraida Campbell. Even her mother, known only by her unmarried title as “Miss Catherine,” has broken ties with Isabella. In Jamaican culture still, as Senior confirms, women-headed households and absent husbands are common, and pregnancy for unmarried middle-class women is especially “dreadful”(Binder 110-14).
Isabella’s social isolation as a supposedly unmarriagable, middle-class woman seems to fuel her compulsion to repeat, with variations, her appeal to her community circle, into each version of which she weaves a thread of her narrative. The haunting reiteration of phrases like “Is from morning I don’t eat” (“don’t eat a thing from morning/don’t get a thing to eat from morning”) (76, 79), and “I have to whisper and tell you this for I don’t want the breeze to catch it” (75, 77, then at the end, the reversal: “I going to make the breeze take it to the four corners of everywhere”: 82), stylistically links her appeals. Meanwhile, the listeners comprise different family groupings—courting couples, young men who leer, a mother and daughter—reflecting different players from what has become her own psychodrama. Each appeal finds psychological closure with a ritual statement of gratitude for a positive encounter (“bless you”) or agonistically-toned curses for the unsympathetic.

Isabella’s marginalization is made more complete by the recurring mention of Dr. Bartholomew and his threat to lock her up at Bellvue psychiatric hospital, as he claims that her baby does not exist. Unlike King’s narrator, invested with the communal responsibility of a cultural storyteller, Isabella’s reliability is at issue. She does have a fantasy about disappearing inside her “wappen-bappen” or “slum ‘house’” (Cassidy and LePage) so effectively that “they could shine they torch, bring searchlight and Ex-ray and TV and atomic bomb. Not one of them could ever find me” (78). This exaggerated boast suggests that the “mad” woman is truly invisible to her society, with all its tools of reason (including television and the bomb, of course). Isabella’s speeches at least ensure that she will not go unheard. Admittedly, the baby’s sex, and weight, change in different addresses, leading us to wonder if there even was a baby. Yet her sharp-tongued scolding of her witnesses, and their resentful or cowed retreats, signals an authority, like that of King’s storyteller, due to someone who is “keeping” an important story safe. Finally, Isabella claims that Caribbean “obeah” was used against her by her enemies; in Senior’s explanation, this is “witchcraft, evil magic or sorcery by which supernatural power is invoked to achieve personal protection or the destruction of enemies” (Encyclopedia). This reference to folk belief certainly gives this story a primary orality connection to “the other world which lurks not too far beyond our everyday existence” (Rowell 484).

The story ends with Isabella’s final demand for justice, as “I want to have my day in court, I want to stand up in front of judge and jury” (81) just as she has held her own “people’s court” in the marketplace. These demands as questions ascend up the social hierarchy from the betraying individuals involved in the alleged love triangle, to Dr. Bartholomew, the government and ultimately, God: “If there is still Massa God up above, is what I do why him have to tek everybody side against me?” (82) Senior’s construction of Isabella’s voice through impassioned appeals to her community, individual by individual, in her community’s double-tongue, creates Ong’s “empathetic and participatory” atmosphere, drawing a large family circle which ultimately affirms her dignity, with words and donations of support more often than not. How do we answer the accusing title question? The actual truth of Isabella’s speech may perhaps reside not in the details but in the drive of her “mad” oratory, its adaptive and eloquent questioning of those (like us?) who would try to ignore the voices of the powerless, the homeless, women. For if we are “captured” by her monologues, we are willing captives. Senior recreates Isabella’s “hybridized” speech in tribute to her own growth as a writer: “I was born and grew up in rural Jamaica...My major influence then was the
oral tradition—storytelling, ‘hot’ preaching, praying and testifying ... concerts, ‘tea-
meetings’ and so on” (Rowell 480). Yet far from trying to recapture this, Senior
“implicitly acknowledges the interpenetration of the cosmopolitan and the insular as
an essential element in the process of creolization” (cited in Donnell 129-30). In “You
Think I Mad, Miss?” we find an instance of artful “testifying” to an act of ostracism
which demands a new “hearing”—within the marketplace of the book.

13 By contrast with King and Senior, MacLeod and Vanderhaeghe occupy the privileged
category of “white writer,” being Canadians of Celtic and European descent who do not
share the same degree of alienation from narratives of nationhood that Senior and King
may claim, although both explore the “cages” of economic mobility through portraits
of working-class men who are often fishers, farmers and miners. In doing so, I argue
that they are also “double-voicing,” by gesturing towards a marginalized subjectivity
associated with primary orality—class consciousness in Vanderhaeghe, ethnicity in
MacLeod—but within the quintessentially literate, and literary, short story.13 The
auditors their speakers address are thus implicit—reader surrogates—rather than the
community members King and Senior dramatize. MacLeod’s stories have been praised
for their “regional” emphasis on Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and their folkloric quality of
orality. “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun” reflects the construction of family myth,
showing how narratives shape families in what Langellier and Peterson call “group
ordering” performances of communal identity. If King’s and Senior’s stories highlight
cultural difference with titles that interrogate the “norm” by subverting traditional
history or standard English, MacLeod’s title suggests the pre-scientific world view of
the oral culture still accessible in the continuing family story of the “cù mòr glas a’
bhàis” or “big grey dog of death” (translated from Gaelic).14 As well, both MacLeod and
Vanderhaeghe offer subtle interrogations of dominant nationalist narratives from an
ethnic (Scotland within the British Isles) or a regional (western Canada) perspective,
while also undermining masculinist stereotypes by redrawing family circles to include
what is often unspoken or unspeakable.

14 Beginning MacLeod’s story, as with the others, brings a different world into
consciousness, one evoking Ong’s primary orality culture, although relayed more
distantly by the third-person narrator, concealing a first person “storykeeper” who will
emerge officially on the seventh page of this ten-page story. “Fairy tale” colouring still
clings to the humble adverb “Once” (…”upon a time”...) and the temporally loose
description that follows: “Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived
beside the sea. And the man had a dog of which he was very fond. She was large and
grey, a sort of staghound from another time” (118). Unlike King, MacLeod de-
historicizes his story, not naming the family except by a “Highland name” (symbolic of
Scottish nationhood), and not locating them, except by maritime geography. The
active if wordless presence of the past in MacLeod’s fiction has been much noted; he
ever links man and atavistic dog in what will be a fatal bond, repeated in this family
down five generations to the latest, contemporary, teller of this “group ordering”
narrative. As Colin Nicholson describes it, “A genealogical fiction produces a fiction of
genealogy that has been internalized as self-definition” (98). So the first “family circle”
drawn is between man and animal—an animal introduced mysteriously to the
household as a “foundling” in a handmade box— reminding us of the “relations”
between humans and nature valorized in King’s interpretation of Native philosophy,
and in a similar interdependence found in the pre-industrial society frequently treated in MacLeod’s fiction.

15 Elsewhere, I have noted the emphasis on the “hand” in MacLeod, and in this story as well, the father is a “large and gentle man” (124) with “large and gentle hands” (120). The careful use of repetition too reminds us of the “stock phrase” found in the oral tradition while the selective use of Gaelic performs “code-switching” which makes us aware of a submerged past and its untranslatable beliefs. The irony of this “uncanny” story is that the “cù mòr glas” is taken in, saved when as a run-over pup, only to become the unwitting instrument of death for the man who helped her to breed: “And at the proper time he took the cù mòr glas and the big dog down to the sea where he knew there was a hollow in the rock which appeared only at low tide....He was a man used to working with the breeding of animals ... often with the funky smell of animal semen heavy on his large and gentle hands” (120). Running away to bear her young on the island, she later brings death to her master when her six feral pups turn her friendly assault on him into a deadly one after they are discovered (121). His two sons witness this, holding on to his “warm and bloodied hands” (122); both of their lives will end early due to an unbearable vision of the murderous dog. But it is the father’s death that will be most often retold, just as it is being retold now, as we are reminded by the narrator’s asides: “so the story goes/as the story goes” (120, 121).

16 This legend of the “big grey dog of death” and her offspring that grows out of this ironic tragedy will become a family narrative which provides identity through a perceived destiny, the supernatural notion, like Caribbean “obeah,” of a “buidseachd or evil spell cast on the man by some mysterious enemy”(123). Thus, his descendants retain a fear of a curse, however “improbable” to literate minds, represented by the fatal vision. As Nicholson observes, “the effect of story upon self, and the making of self through the making of story expose narrative identity as self-deferral” (102). Fear and identity are linked in the moment of paternal death, as the last storykeeper reflects in present time on the deathwatch undertaken for another “large and gentle man” (126) now dying of old age, for “we are afraid to hear the phrase born of the vision” (126). The story ends with the speaker suspended in terror and wonder at this anticipated phrase, “if and when” they hear their father call down “his own particular death” (127) and thereby enter the communal narrative of their ancestral identity through the shared story-become-vision of the fateful cù mòr glas a’ bhàis.

17 Vanderhaeghe’s “Cages” offers a contemporary variation on the fatedness of identity, but less metaphysically and within the smallest family circle of all: the nuclear family of “Pop,” silent mother, Gene and Billy Simpson. The title has multiple references, but most obvious is Pop’s entrapment by a masculine economy of mine work, symbolized by the mineshaft elevator Billy once nauseatingly experienced on a mine tour. There is also the cage of male violence which especially tempts Gene, the good-looking but impulsive “body” to Billy’s more reflective “head.” Finally, it is seventeen-year-old Billy’s fate to become his “brother’s keeper” that emerges in an identity-forming narrative as he tells the story that leads him to make that constricting family promise.

18 Vanderhaeghe has commented that “the biggest advantage of the first-person voice is intimacy. Because I’m interested in colloquial language, I’m drawn to the first person” (Kruk Voice 222). He uses this interest to good effect, as we enter the story: “Here it is, 1967, the Big Birthday. Centennial Year they call it. The whole country is giving itself a pat on the back. Holy shit, boys, we made it.” (99). Billy’s elastic voice is effectively
introduced, along with another myth of national origin: the marking of Canada’s centenary. But this myth is punctured by an adolescent who sarcastically (and with good-natured profanity) applauds our hapless success as a young country stumbling along with the rest of its “boys.” As in King, there is a suggested critique of national narratives that suppress otherness; here, the otherness has mainly to do with working-class masculinity, in which violence is accepted if not expected. Billy and Gene are introduced right away as physical competitors, as when Gene reacts to an unexpected loss at darts by “drilling” one at Billy. Gene is punished with a “whaling” by Pop with an extension cord, but Billy bears the brunt of the responsibility with “that yap of yours” (100-01). This long-standing pattern reveals how the father sees Gene’s “rage” as a trap, appealing to younger Billy as “manager” of Gene’s temper. Billy’s loyalty to the father leads to his role in protecting Gene from the consequences of the poolroom fight which is the major episode, leaving Billy, ironically, with a “criminal record and a social worker” who feeds him “bullshit” about how his father loves both boys equally. As an outspoken, long-haired adolescent seen as “kind of a hippy” (115), Billy also questions authority figures like the social worker Miss Krawchuk or the police who arrest him for Gene’s crime, mocking them with insults and putdowns.

Billy counters the family narrative offered by the social worker with his view, to a sympathetic second-person auditor, of the family triangle. He does so with a voice fluent with colloquialisms, slang (at times sexist) and profanity appropriate to the posture of adolescent defiance. His intelligence is evident not just in his academic success, his baseball strategizing, but in his obvious enjoyment of competitive wit, from his needling of his brother to sarcastic exchanges with his father to his colourful similes, of which he offers half a dozen. 

Watching TV while waiting up for Pop, he comments “Most of those characters with all the answers couldn’t pour piss out of a rubber boot if they read the instructions printed on the sole” (102). I am reminded here of the “agonistic” tone to ritual “insult contests” described as “standard in oral societies across the world, [such that] reciprocal name-calling has been fitted with a specific name in linguistics: flyting” (Ong 44). Billy’s frustrations with life are thus verbalized in a version of “flyting,” while his brother’s anger finds a less acceptable outlet in violent outbursts and acts of disobedience. Meanwhile, Pop is perpetually frustrated by his role as miner. As in MacLeod, the father is presented as large, but not gentle, his hands also marked by his labour, but punitively: “He has cuts all over those hands of his, barked knuckles and raspberries that never heal because the salt in the potash ore keeps them open, eats right down to the bone sometimes” (103). Day by day, Pop is literally consumed by his employment.

The father’s threat that the boys will either succeed at school or go to work in the mine is tested on the last day of school when failing Gene attempts to cheat a couple of “plough jokeys” at poker-pool, as witnessed by Billy. The two boys—big Marvin, described by Billy as having acned skin “looking like all-dressed pizza, heavy on the cheese” (109), the other with a “duck ass” haircut that becomes his identifying moniker—are treated somewhat too casually by Gene, in his bravado, despite Billy’s help, and the accusation of cheating leads to the inevitable fight between Gene and Marvin. This test of Gene’s working-class masculinity becomes another example of the fated “terrible thing” (101, italics in original) that Pop predicts Gene will do with his anger. Using the pool ball as a concealed weapon, he viciously assaults Marvin and runs. Billy, left behind with Gene’s bloody jacket, decides to reverse the family triangle by allowing himself to be arrested as the “hard case” who beat up Marvin. But the moment of being
placed in the jail cell recalls that other “cage,” and his failure then is replayed as he screams his innocence at the constable. The father’s response to his “good” son’s second failure as a man is both to strike him as a “snitch” and confide in him his fears for Gene’s future, even barring Pop’s threat (now abandoned) of a future in the “cage”: “What’s going to happen to Eugene?” Billy’s storykeeping ends with his adoption of the role of brother’s keeper, as he makes this understated but unmistakable vow to Pop, “Nothing....I’ll do my best” (118). Billy thus trades rivalrous triangle for caring circle, in an underplayed gesture of protectiveness.

In distinct yet overlapping ways, King, Senior, MacLeod and Vanderhaeghe “construct” first-person voices in fiction which “keep” aspects of an oral culture alive if we have the ears to “hear” as well as the eyes to read. This is only one way in which the stories “double-voice”—each speaker either creates hybrid constructions, linguistically and narratively (King, Senior) or addresses two audiences simultaneously by means of subtler “code switching” and shifts in register for minority communities defined by ethnic nationalism or working-class identity (MacLeod, Vanderhaeghe). Each writer traces different “family circles” which reflect their implicit view of the contract between teller and community: the teller’s responsibility to weave individuals narratives into a culturally true story. It is worth noting that the largest family circles are traced by the first two feminine/femininized speakers, King’s storyteller and Senior’s Isabella. MacLeod and Vanderhaeghe present male speakers who preserve and explain family identity. While speaking to the psychological importance of feminine voices in Caribbean and Native cultures, this correspondence may be attributed to the fact that, on many levels, women create families and men defend them. Voices may be readily invented or performed, as these stories show, but the voices of orally-strong communities—Native American, Creole, Celtic, working-class—will never be completely suppressed or silenced as long as they have storykeepers like these.

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NOTES

2. In a somewhat different version from the one that was later published—without illustrations—in *One Good Story, That One*. Most King criticism to date treats the picture book version but I will be discussing the later, collected one.

3. In a Canadian context, see the discussion of “Realism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism” in New.


5. See his much-anthologized story, “Borders” (*One Good Story, That One*), in which the Blackfoot mother rejects the binary opposition, Canadian/American, insisting instead on traveling under her third, unauthorized identity.

6. I note that Senior is listed in the new *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* (2002); however, Michael Thorpe, reviewing *Discerner of Hearts* in 1996, disagrees, concluding that “hers is a Jamaican, not (yet) a Canadian voice.” However, in interview, Senior argues that “It does not matter any more where you live, it’s what you are bringing into that marketplace” (Binder 113)

7. See “Coyote Tricks Owl,” (Robinson) in Bennett and Brown. Wendy Wickwire, an ethnographer, is responsible for transcribing and preserving Robinson’s stories in text form.

8. See King’s formulation of four types of Native literature in his essay, “Godzilla vs. Postcolonial,” reprinted in *Unhomely States*. His own work suggests the “interfusional” category.

9. For an earlier and fuller explanation of “the relations,” see King’s Introduction to *All My Relations*: ix.


11. Hyacinth M. Simpson argues persuasively that Isabella’s “schizophrenic delusions are rooted in a crisis over her sexuality...”and that “the mad woman’s public act of tracing brings unhealthy, distorted and ultimately destructive social beliefs and perceptions about female sexuality to public attention in an effort to help individual women and the community move toward more liberating and affirming views of female sexuality” (841).

12. From my reading of her response to her listeners, with the ritual exchange of “God bless you” and “Thank you” in conclusion, it seems as if a majority, six out of the ten encounters, ends with Isabella receiving some charitable donation (but not necessarily moral support). This suggests that financial support is easier, and quicker, to give, in the modern world...

13. It could be noted that MacLeod and Vanderhaeghe, who are white, presently middle-class, males are more detached from their presumed marginalized audiences than King or Senior.
However, King also crosses borders from popular audiences—writing for CBC radio and TV—to more intellectual ones, as he has had a lengthy academic career as well.

14. MacLeod’s story is based upon a Celtic legend, The Grey Dog of Meoble, according to Nicholson (97-98).

15. See my “Hands and Mirrors: Gender Reflections in the Short Stories of Alistair MacLeod and Timothy Findley.”

16. Unlike Senior and her use of patois/patwa, MacLeod glosses his Gaelic phrases, but even this draws attention to a gap in meaning. For instance, to highlight the opacity of language, the narrator recalls their ancestor calling out on the island, “M’eudal cù mòr glas,” and says in an aside, “m’eudal meaning something like dear or darling” (121).

17. The uncanny “having the double semantic capacity to mean its opposite, signifying at once the homely, familiar, friendly, comfortable, intimate and the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, alien and unknown. Besides having the power to signify antithetical meaning, the uncanny also has the power to signify the development of meaning in the direction of ambivalence, from that which was familiar and homely to that which has become unfamiliar, estranging” (Chisholm).

18. In an interesting act of transference, the mother dog becomes the “big grey dog of death,” although her only crime was in bearing the feral pups.

19. It should be noted that “Centennial Year” celebrations offer another example of the dominant narrative not speaking to all perspectives: Billy lives in Saskatchewan, which, along with Alberta, officially entered Confederation (1867) much later (1905). The Queen’s Royal Visit to the Western Provinces in May 2005 was intended to properly mark their Centennial, and later commitment to Canada.

20. For instance, Billy refers casually to Gene’s girlfriends as “seatcovers” and “hair pie” (104), although it is not clear if he is reflecting his own attitude towards women or a borrowed version of his brother’s. He presents himself as jealous of his brother’s sexual success and implicitly lacking such experience.

21. Gene and Pop also share Billy’s colourful lower-class vernacular, but he is the most proficient with it, and he is also the one implicitly shaping and recalling the story, in which their voices are subsumed. See for instance the vivid, biting flavour of the following analogies and similes: about the mine tour, “In my book it was kind of like taking people into the slaughterhouse to prove you’re kind to the cows” (107); about Gene’s pool playing, “He had a shape for the three which slid in the top pocket like shit through a goose” (110); when Marvin finds the ball shot unfairly he pulls it out of the pocket, “Just like little Jack Horner lifting the plum out of the pie” (111); before the fight “Gene shrugged and even kind of sighed, like the hero does in the movies when he has been forced into a corner and has to do something that is against his better nature” (112); when Marvin grabs Gene, “I started looking around right smartly for something to hit the galoot with before he popped my brother like a pimple” (113-114); the expression on the smug police sergeant’s face as he put Billy in the cell “looked like a ripple on a slop pail” (116).

22. “Cages” contains a possible allusion to Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), with its family triangle of two contrasted brothers seeking their father’s approval, the dart game’s mock fratricide and the conclusion’s implications for Billy who will adopt the role, as Cain did not, of being his “brother’s keeper.”
ABSTRACTS

L’objectif de l’article est d’étudier l’oralité de la narration à la première personne chez quatre écrivains canadiens. Ces écrivains donnent voix à des “cercles familiaux”, du plus étroit au plus large, de la famille nucléaire au voisinage. Les voix et les discours du passé (voix ancestrales, discours monologiques, systèmes linguistiques et sociaux) sont aussi convoqués et leurs effets examinés (ressourcement culturel, hybridité, mise en cause, construction ou destruction d’un mythe, etc.). Référence est faite à des entretiens d’écrivains conduits par l’auteur de l’article.

AUTHORS

LAURIE KRUK

Laurie Kruk is Associate Professor, English Studies, at Nipissing University (North Bay, Canada) where she teaches Canadian literature, Native literature and women’s writing. She has published The Voice is the Story: Conversations with Canadian Writers of Short Fiction (2003) and two collections of poetry: Theories of the World (1992); Loving the Alien (2006). Her essay, “Mothering Sons: Stories by Findley, Hodgins and Macleod Uncover the Mother’s Double Voice” will appear in Atlantis: A Women’s Studies Journal in 2007.
In an essay entitled “De la parole à l’écriture”, Roland Barthes exposes the economy of gain and loss that rules the shift from the oral to the written message, and which he calls “la trappe de la scription”. The critic analyses the relationships between “la parole, l’écrit et l’écriture” (utterance, transcription and écriture) in terms of discursive strategies: syntax, expressiveness, impact on the receptor:

1

Voici d’abord, en gros, ce qui tombe dans la trappe de la scription [...] En premier lieu, nous perdons, c’est évident, une innocence ; non pas que la parole soit d’elle-même fraîche, naturelle, spontanée, véridique, expressive d’une sorte d’intériorité pure ; bien au contraire, notre parole (surtout en public), est immédiatement théâtrale, elle emprunte ses tours (au sens stylistique et ludique du terme) à tout un ensemble de codes culturels et oratoires: la parole est toujours tactique ; mais en passant à l’écrit, c’est l’innocence même de cette tactique, perceptible à qui sait écouter, comme d’autres savent lire, que nous gommons ; [...] Autre perte : la rigueur de nos transitions. Souvent, nous “filons” notre discours à bas prix. Ce “filé”, ce flumen orationis dont Flaubert avait le dégoût, c’est la consistance de notre parole. [...] Lorsque nous parlons, lorsque nous “exposons” notre pensée au fur et à mesure que le langage lui vient, nous croyons bon d’exprimer à haute voix les inflexions de notre recherche ; [...] de là, dans notre parole publique, tant de mais et de donc, tant de reprises ou de dénégations explicites. Ce n’est pas que ces petits mots aient une grande valeur logique ; ce sont, si l’on veut, des explétifs de la pensée. L’écriture, souvent, en fait l’économie ; elle ose l’asynède, cette figure coupante qui serait insupportable à la voix, autant qu’une castration.

Cela rejoint une dernière perte, infligée à la parole par sa transcription : celle de toutes ces bribes de langage – du type “n’est-ce pas” – que le linguiste
rattacherait sans doute à l’une des grandes fonctions du langage, la fonction phatique ou d’interpellation ; lorsque nous parlons, nous voulons que notre interlocuteur nous écoute ; nous réveillons alors son attention par des interpellations vides de sens (du type : “allô, allô, vous m’entendez bien ?”) ; très modestes, ces mots, ces expressions ont pourtant quelque chose de discrètement dramatique : ce sont des appels, des modulations – dirais-je, pensant aux oiseaux : des chants ? – à travers lesquels un corps cherche un autre corps. C’est ce chant gauche, plat, ridicule, lorsqu’il est écrit – qui s’était dans notre écriture.1

My purpose here, is to show how the art of short story telling, so deeply rooted in the tradition of folk tales and in oral transmission, can cope with the constraints of written communication—a mode where both sender and sendee belong to a different space-time continuum, where the literary énoncé is submitted to a twofold process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization, where two desires mirror each other and eventually meet.

In this paper, I will examine the oral quality of “The Hairy Man”2, a short story that belongs to the bush yarn tradition, i.e. a form of narrative whose main focus is the “yowie”, the equivalent of the yeti. With its rhetoric that consists mainly in voicing a sense of national identity, it revisits the oral past through a poetics grounded on the rich flavour of vernacular language, on the story-teller’s know-how, on the integration of authorial comments that manipulate the plot through strategies of omission or suggestion.

“The Curse”3 serves as a counterpart to Lawson’s yarn. It reads like ‘a theatre of voices’: structurally speaking, it is an innovative piece of poetic prose where sketchy descriptions of the bush landscape alternate with elliptic dialogues that tear through the textual space/fabric. Linguistically speaking, Prichard’s story relies heavily on the plastic and acoustic dimension of words, and subordinates the plot to the dramatized presence of human utterance. It also revolves around the discrepancy between wording and voicing; as it is, its “written orality” emanates from the interplay of silences, implicit statements, as well as from the mesh of voices that enhance the overwhelming presence of vacuity, dereliction and loss.

“The Hairy Man”

Voicing national identity

In Lawson’s Australia, it was the bush that stirred the imagination, and it was the bush yarn—a tale conveyed by word of mouth—that provided both a realistic view of life there and a voice to turn-of-the-century Australian nationalism. The bush yarn had a style of its own, midway between speaking and writing; its dominant feature was calculated casualness, its favourite subject-matter, the celebration of the basic Australian virtues confronted with “the weirdly melancholy and aggressively lonely Australian bush.” (64). In spite of their highly referential dimension, bush ballads were acknowledged as pieces of fiction, as “true lies”, “make-believes” so to speak, i. e., stories whose main function was first to entertain generations of listeners. And it is precisely the relay of so many “reliable liars” across decades that legitimates the ‘reality’ of the tale. This is what happens with the Hairy Man:
He had been heard of and seen and described so often and by so many reliable liars that most people agreed that there must be something. (64)

Henry Lawson is still a reference today in Australian literature and there is still perhaps a bush mystique that surrounds his name. Born in 1867, he was a militant, a nationalist icon and a regular contributor to The Bulletin, nicknamed “The Bushman's Bible”, a weekly journal founded in Sydney in 1880. He did consider himself as a spokesman for his country and culture:

From the age of seventeen, until now, with every disadvantage and under all sorts of hard conditions, I have written for Australia, and all Australia, and for Australia only. I was the first to introduce the Bushman to the world. I believe that I have done more than any other writer to raise the national spirit and the military spirit in Australia. (65)

7 In his tale, local colour stems from the repetitive references to the country itself, to its environment, to its landscapes, to its patterns of thought and behaviour. Referential illusion is achieved through the evocation/depiction of a specific mode of living with its trades and people often confined to types: “the mounted constable”, “the young doctor”, and Andy, “the hairiest and the ugliest man in the district” with his “peculiar shade of brogue.” (72). Each detail – each “effet de réel”, to use R. Barthes's categorization - appeals to the native audience’s historical, geographical and cultural background:

It was the day after Anniversary Day. Dave and Jim were patriots, and therefore were feeling very repentant and shaky. (65)
It’s young Foley”, said Jack, “the son of that old timber-getter that’s just taken up a selection long the road near Home Rule.” (70)

8 The mood behind it is to make of the story a playground for the recognition and projection of a national consciousness and an Australian patriotic feeling. For the bush yarn was originally more than a mere social intercourse and cement: its aim was also to construct a collective national subject: the bush hero, half factual, half fictional.

The narrative itself contains all the topoï of the genre: insistence on class rather than race or gender, on male bonding rather than on marriage links, on rural life rather than urban life; it also includes ideological clues, “idéologèmes” (in Mikhail Bakhtine’s terminology) dictated by some aspects of socio-political life in Australia at the beginning of the century. They take the form of common sayings or ready-made sentences that integrate the frame narrator’s discourse and may eventually be overheard as authorial comments: “Bush mateship is a grand thing, drunk or sober” (67); “Andy, like most slow-thinking men, often did desperate things in a crisis.” (70)

The tale relates anecdotes about commonplace people, “simple-minded, honest, good-natured fellows” (66), mainly ‘bush mates’ (for Australia at that time was a man’s world) portrayed with humour:

[...] an angel came along on horseback. It was Jack Jones from Mudgee-Budgee, a drinking mate of theirs, a bush-telegram joker, and the ne'er-do-well of the district. (67).

The story dramatizes everyday experience and is full of practices (gambling, heavy drinking), domestic imagery (kangaroos, pubs, huts), ghosts of all sorts, “spooks and bogies”, and legendary figures like the Hairy Man, a riddle that gives rise to harsh speculation:

The most popular and enduring theory was that he was a gorilla, or an orang-outang which had escaped from a menagerie long ago. He was also said to be a new
kind of kangaroo, or the last of a species of Australian animals which hadn't been
discovered yet. (64; see also 67-68)

12 For the Hairy Man does belong to national memory; of course, it is nothing but a
fantasy whose function is to channel collective fears of the racial, ethnic, cultural
other. In Lawson's short story, the Hairy Man as motif appears and disappears like the
Loch Ness monster; it sometimes gives the impression of getting lost in the
proliferation of minor stories (68-69) that forms the intricate pattern of the main
narrative, before it springs up to the surface of the text, like the return of the
repressed. (68)

13 On closer reading though, it soon becomes clear that the enigmatic Hairy Man serves
also as a pretext for the bush yarn as folk-tale and as a pre-text to Lawson's narrative.
In other words, both stories are involved in an intertextual relationship where the yarn
is the hypo-text and the short story the hyper-text. The motif dear to the tradition runs
like a leitmotiv in Lawson's story. And it is the presence in filigree of the 'monster' that
sets it within its cultural context, within space and time altogether ("As far as I
can remember, the yarn of the Hairy Man was told in the Blue Mountains district of New South
Wales.", 64); it is it that generates a multiplicity of digressions, speeches and dialogues
where a great many distant and different voices intersect and interplay, penetrate the
frame narrative. In the whole process, it summons figures that belong to a collective
imagination where everything is dramatized and intensified.

The bush yarn revisited

14 Lawson's short story is a first-person narrative that is conspicuously reader-oriented, i.
e., it rests mainly on a special type of encoding that privileges the phatic function of
language. It can be argued that the truth of Lawson's story lies not so much in the
contents itself as in the various stylistic devices that all aim to arouse the receptor's
curiosity and pleasure.

15 The story-line is quite easy to grasp but far from being straightforward, it lingers here
and there between analepses and prolepses, meanders across embedded stories (67),
sub-plots, digressions (68), apartés (66, 70), and pieces of dialogues (70). All those
textual units spin the yarn of the Hairy Man; all of them comfort the illusion of the
narrator's presence and fuel the audience's desire for the plot. Apart from a few
misunderstandings and a type of humour that rests mainly on low comic devices like
exaggeration⁸, Lawson's discursive strategies rely on the fine blend of private
conversations with collective discourses as well as on the combination of the codes of
story-telling with the qualities of informal conversation. And yet, in spite of its
apparent directness, his tale is no random talk at all: instead, it is a most elaborate
mode, namely a written énoncé that strives to keep alive the qualities of oral speech.
Not only did Lawson choose the outside reality as a framework for his fiction; it is his
special care for the immediacy of oral narratives that prompted his pragmatics of
fiction-writing. His major stylistic gambit was twofold:

1/ to perpetuate the bush yarn tradition and become a national voice in his turn –
which he did.

16 2/ to shape a mode of story-telling that would combine the parameters of oral speech
constitutive of folk tales, fairy tales and yarns with the formal elements characteristic
of written productions. Lawson was certainly well aware that the shift from one mode
to another might endanger the specificity of a literary genre that must respect the codes of verbal exchange, even though it strives to go well beyond them.

The narrative technique adopted by Lawson was first and foremost a means to reproduce the expressiveness of oral speech and to compensate for the absence of the many forms of non-verbal language proper to oral transmission, such as body language, (gestures, movements, hesitations, pauses, silences) and the human voice whose modulations and inflexions constitute a major marker of oral communication that regulates the receptor’s activity and maintains connection. For the schéma interlocutif that serves as a model to the written text cannot be restricted to linguistic communication stricto sensu: it is a semiotic process/activity whose modes of reception are part and parcel of its own modes of production. To sum up: Lawson’s poetics of story-writing is not exactly a matter of transcription, of paring down the narrative discourse and getting rid of the superfluous present in oral speech (which Barthes calls its “scories”); it is rather, a matter of integrating the vividness of verbal exchange so as to seduce and entertain through the mimetic powers of language.

In the role of the story-teller ready to regale his audience with savoury stories about the bush, the narrator of “The Hairy Man” puts his know-how to the test; he codifies his discourse most carefully, inviting his potential receptor to share his nostalgia for the “rare old times” when story-teller and listener would meet by the camp-fire. The result is this: far from being monologic, his énoncé is, by essence, dialogic each time the narrative voice introduces fragments of reported speech in its discourse, or each time it sprinkles the national idiom with different lexical registers and adopts both its characters’ and audience’s clichés and idiolects with a view to making his tale more realistic and the proximity of the voice more perceptible. For, like many pieces of fiction that belong to the realistic mode, “The Hairy Man”, is grounded on an illusion of phonocentricity that matches character with voice in order to create an impression of immediacy. Here, the voice of each protagonist is both identifiable and identified. In this talkative text full of verbs of utterance (chatter, murmur, lisp, mutter) and of terms that qualify the modalities and intensities of the human voice, the variations in height and intensity proper to each locutor are constantly foregrounded. Here is a fine selection of them:

Where Mahoney said “shstone” Foley would say “stawn” – a brogue with a drawl which sounded ridiculous in an angry man. He drawled most of his oaths. (72) [...] It seems that he was splitting fencing timber down ‘beyant the new cimitry”. (72) [...] He didn’t bargain for “thim blankly hail-sta-w-ns”. (72) [...] “I thawt the wimmin would stop.” “Whoy did ye think that?” asked Mahoney. “What would they shtop for?”. “How th’hell was I to know? Curiosity, I suppose. (72)

In many places, the “natural” syntactic bonds proper to oral speech are maintained. In Lawson’s tale, the repetitive use of “but” and “so” hints at a deliberate intention to imitate the simplistic syntax of yarns: those seemingly insignificant grammatical words, (“des explétifs de la pensée”, Barthes) signal the spontaneous flow of thoughts characteristic of verbal communication:

They weren’t sure with whom, that was the trouble, but had a drink-lurid recollection of having got off their horses several times on the way home to fight each other. They were too sick to eat or to smoke yet; so they sat outside the hut with their nerves all unstrung and their imaginations therefore particularly active. (65; emphasis mine)
It also happens that the syntactic line is dropped to leave room for metaleptic fragments or parentheses that signal the story-teller's presence and control over the narrative – a mode that does not exclude the rhetoric of oral speech:

The day before they had both sworn to him—solemnly, affectionately, and at last impatiently, and even angrily—that they wouldn't get drunk, that they wouldn't bet, that they wouldn't draw a penny on the contract, that they'd buy a week’s provisions first thing, that they'd bring the things home with them on their horses, and that they'd come home early. And now—they'd spent his money as well as their own! Andy made no remarks and asked no questions when they woke at midday; and they took his silence in a chastened spirit. (66; emphasis mine)

, honest, good-natured fellows whose ideas come slowly, who are slow at arriving at decisions (and whose decisions are nearly inevitably right), when he'd once made up his mind nothing short of a severe shock of earthquake could move him. (66-67; emphasis mine)

Some said there were stones as big as hen's eggs; some said the storm lasted over an hour, and some said more—but the time was probably half or three-quarters of an hour. (69; emphasis mine)

All in all, what Lawson tries to do here, is nothing but imitate the syntactic pattern characteristic of the discourse of the yarn, such as it appears in so many reported dialogues:

[Andy speaking] “He stood up in the cart and hammered into the horse, and galloped it all the way home, full-bat up to the door; then he jumped down, leaving the cart and horse standing there, and went in and lay down on the bed, and wouldn't speak to anybody for two hours.” (68; emphasis mine)

“The Curse”

In startling contrast to “The Hairy Man”, Katharine S. Prichard’s “The Curse” offers another facet of Australian literature that focuses in its own way on what Lawson himself called “the bush with its haunting ghostliness”.

A theatre of voices

Reading Prichard’s short story we first find ourselves at grips with the conspicuous dialectics between three compact blocks of narrative prose and a set of three dialogues written in a minimalist style. In many places, blank spaces break through the textual fabric and mark the alternation of a first-person narrative (a very discrete “we”) and sketchy utterances. The passages in paratactic prose form a sequence of three tableaux introduced by the homodiegetic narrator in the role of the eyewitness/listener. In company with his friends he is riding across the bush and as they reach a clearing, they are faced with a beautiful stretch of land, some kind of multi-coloured patchwork that surrounds a hut: “Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the hut, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.”

The story opens and ends with a description of the whole place that can read like stage directions and where negative notations (“wrecked”, “No sign or sound of life”) combine with the motifs of absence (“leaves”) and utterance (“chatter”, “lisping”, “whispering”, “gossiping”):

Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the hut, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.
Sun steeped the valley among folding hills, dark with red gum and jarrah. No sign
or sound of life, but the life of the trees, squirt of a bird’s song, a bird’s body
through stirring leaves. Chatter of leaves. Clatter and chatter of leaves, husky, frail.
Small green tongues, lisping and clicking together, twisting over and licking each
other; whispering, gossiping, as we rode into the clearing. (175)

26 In between: an enigmatic and reflexive énoncé that knits together different levels of
utterance that all revolve around evil and malediction, in the form of the “curse”,
“Patterson’s curse”, at the origin of Alf’s misfortune. At the diegetic level, “The Curse”
tells the story of a bush man imprisoned for a minor offence. It is full of voices and
sounds, but quite paradoxically, the human subject seems to be totally absent. In a way
reminiscent of the “Interludes” of The Waves by Virginia Woolf, the fictional world
seems to be “a world without a self” where the narrative consciousness/instance is
overwhelmed by the commanding power of visual and acoustic stimuli.

27 The dialogues are highly stylized and carefully framed by the main discourse as if to
prevent them from getting lost, dispersed. There are no reporting verbs (say, declare,
answer, ask, add, claim…) – except in one place - and the subject-matter is Alf: the chap
is the right opposite of the bush hero: “Gutless”, “Lazy”, “Didn’t like work.”, “Liked
reading”. As the locutors’ laconic speeches gradually fill with information, we learn first
that Alf has been sent to jail for he has stolen “a rifle, harness and bridle”, and that a
“fawn-coloured bitch” is waiting for his return:

‘He’s in gaol’
‘In gaol.’
‘In gaol?’
‘Aye!’
Harness, a rifle and bridle.’ (175)
[…]
‘And the bitch…’
‘Tawny, fawn-coloured.’
‘Eyes like Alf’s...’
Light, empty eyes.’ (176)

28 The whole account remains enigmatic in spite of the insistence on a few recurrent
motifs:

1. the harshness of Australian everyday life:
   ‘Rough-haired, chestnut...’
   ‘Weedy and starved looking.’
   ‘Alf?’
   ‘No, the brumby.’
   ‘Both of them.’ (176)

1. the hostility of natural landscape where “a noxious weed” turns dreams into nightmares and
   kills all hopes:
   ‘The curse!’
   ‘Patterson’s curse?’
   ‘A noxious weed...’,
   ‘That’s what it is, he says.’
   ‘Salt and poisonous as the sea.’
   ‘An enchanted sea.’
   ‘Sea of dreams.’
   ‘Dead sea.’
   […]
   ‘Starved.’
   Took to stealing.’
'Little things at first …'
'Bridle and tommy-axe.' (177)

1. Life in the bush with its traditional figures: the hut, kangaroo-dogs, kangaroo-tail soup, mates...

'Drowned, was he?
'Daft?'
'Touched they said.'
'To let a place go, like this.'
'No.'
'Only done for.'
'Gutless.'
'Lazy.'
'Liked reading.' (177)

They have no faces as if identity were erased; they are mere voices over, rootless voices that utter truncated segments of speech made of mono-syllabic words, nominal clauses and paratactic sentences that often lead to nowhere but to zones of silence materialized by dots and dashes in the text. (175, 176, 177, 178) As for Alf, he is essentially a ghostly presence, the subject of his friends’ énoncé.

The dark core of the short story emerges from the second tableau. In it, the visual instance/narrative voice focuses on the landscape around Alf’s derelict hut: we learn that “the blue” is in fact the meadow infested by a weed with blue flowers, originally an ornamental plant introduced into Australia in 1880 by a settler named Patterson and which soon proved to be “a noxious weed”, a plague for native grasslands and woodlands. The plant is soft to the touch (“Blue and purple, the silky tissues swooning to [Jim’s] grip”, 176), and is a treat to the gaze, with its bright colours (“turquoise and azure, or fading mauve and magenta”) but it is invasive, aggressive, too:

Crowding upon us, reaching up to shin and calves, they thrust themselves against walls of the hut, lapping the doorstep; swirled under a fig tree and down through the orchard. (176)

Alf was lazy; he would not till the land to eradicate the plant and keep control over hostile wilderness. In his absence, the blue flowers that look so beautiful from a distance (“halcyon seas”), have proliferated and turned the whole place into a “Dead sea.”, “Salt and poisonous as the sea.” For the plant is both a real scourge and a predator:

Feeding, ravening on the earth, spread over ploughed land set to the mould of an old furrow, and under the fruit trees. The curse, sucking all the life blood from their soil, elixirs, manganese, phosphates, ammonia, and flaunting them in her seas – blue, sulphate of copper and magenta, as the sari of a Tamil dancing girl. (176)

The last tableau provides a vision of the place dominated by dereliction, emptiness and silence. As the locutors leave the diegetic scene, the narrative stance resumes its description, insisting on the “dead trees row by row tomake walls”, on the “rusty share of an old plough”, on a “barrow of bush timber falling to pieces”. The last two paragraphs reshuffle the elements present in the opening sequence: the rumours coming from the trees, the valley and the hills, the hut:

Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal. From time immemorial into eternity, leaves laughing; innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur falling away with the wind. [...] But the leaves still chattering, lisping and muttering endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch straining over her puppies down in the sunshine. Gone from back-sliding eyes the sun-steeped valley between folding hills, and hut,
dim, ghostly, in calm seas, fading tetratheca and turquoise; birds flying across with jargon of wild cries. (178)

“Displaced vocality”

What is remarkable in Prichard’s story, is certainly the responding pulse of nature to those scraps of talk. What is overheard by the homodiegetic narrator is the multiplicity of (fantasmatic?) voices that emerge from the whole place and that are invested by the non-human, essentially by the vegetal and the animal.

Beyond the anthropomorphic dimension of the scene where it is nature that is speaking, what is striking is the fact that those verbs of utterance that pin down vocality in all its guises, (laugh, chatter, lisp, mutter, gossip, whisper), qualify non-articulate speech where signifiers are freed from signifieds and where meaning is blurred. The finest examples of those “extra-linguistic zones of meaning” (Yaeger 204) are the bird’s song that expands into “a jargon of wild cries” (178), and the disquieting “chatter and clatter of leaves” playing crescendo until they become “Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal.” (178)

A growing sense of the uncanny stems from the combination of inarticulate speech – “the chatter of leaves” — with metallic noises associated with the horses present in the second tableau: “Small green tongues, lisping and clicking together, twisting over and licking each other.” (175); “Horses nudging, reins chinkle-chinkle over a post by the gate.” (176). By the end of the third one, the obsessional motif of the leaves is still there (it is repeated 8 times throughout the story): it is as if it had spread over the whole narrative a little like the “noxious weed”: “From time immemorial into eternity, leaves laughing; innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur falling away with the wind.”

The echo-chamber of “The Curse” depicts a world where language is in excess of representation and where words are in deficit of meaning. As voices rise from both everywhere and nowhere, from the wilderness, from the margins of the civilized world perhaps, all those speech acts produce nothing but cries and murmurs. They are not so spectral as the locutors’ voices but they form a cacophony, a mesh of reverberations that create a discomforting impression of circularity and entrapment.

A modernist aesthetics

In the last part of my paper, I want to insist on the modernist aesthetics present in Prichard’s short story, and I would first argue that the polyvocal discourse of “The Curse” exemplifies the shift, in literary history, from phonocentric illusion to dialogism and heteroglossia.

At the textual level, the story is saturated with voice effects that rise from stylistic devices like repetitions and ‘repetitions-with-slight-modification”, a basic feature of D.H. Lawrence’s poetics much favoured by Prichard herself.

Azure, magenta, tetratheca, mauve and turquoise: the hut, a wrecked ship in halcyon seas.

Sun steeped the valley among folding hills, dark with red gum and jarrah. No sign or sound of life, but the life of the trees, squirt of a bird’s song, a bird’s body through stirringleaves. Chatter of leaves. Clatter and chatter of leaves, husky, frail. Small green tongues, lisping and clicking together, twisting over and licking each other; whispering, gossiping, as we rode into the clearing.(175)


Laughter of leaves, inhuman, immortal. From time immemorial into eternity, leaves laughing: innumerable small green tongues clacking, their dry murmur falling away with the wind. [...] But the leaves still chatter, lisping and muttering endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch straining over her puppies down in the sunshine. Gone from back-sliding eyes the sun-steeped valley between folding hills, and hut, dim, ghostly, in calm seas, fading tetratheca and turquoise; birds flying across with jargon of wild cries. (178)

39 Those patterns of repetition that reify words on paper and ruffle the textual fabric let the reader hear what Roland Barthes calls “le bruissement de la langue” that stems from the sheer materiality of linguistic substance. In “The Curse”, the syntagmatic/metonymic flow of words is constantly barred by the playful use of signifiers. The discursive mode operates along several lines:

1. Lexical repetitions: semantic clusters of words related to colour, to utterance and to nature plus the systematic use of verbal forms in -ing: twisting, whispering, gossiping...
2. Glissandos that generate a slight shift from one signifier to another and their migration from one textual unit to another; in some places, this is achieved through a change in grammatical categories:
   - the hut -> hut -> the hut
   - chatter -> clatter; clicking -> licking -> clacking; trooper -> tracker; halcyon seas -> dead sea -> calm seas
   - Sun steeped the valley among folding hill -> the sun-steeped valley between folding hill.
   - Dark with red gum and jarrah -> Dark in the forest, under the red gums and jarrah

1. A peculiar phonic pattern that skilfully merges alliterations, consonantic repetitions with paronomasia, as in this paradigmatic example:
   Longslopes of hill-side facing the hut, with scrub of saplings, tall, straight-stemmed, symmetrical fleece of leaves, young green and gold, tight-packed as wool on a sheep's back. (175-176)

40 4/ Equivocacy/ambiguity:

41 In some places like the transition between the metaphoric/poetic description of “the blue” with its connotations of sadness (“to feel blue”) and the third set of dialogues, meaning seems to vacillate, to become uncertain:

   Chatter and clatter of leaves; a vague, sly gibberish running through all the hills:
   'The curse!'
   'Patterson’s curse?'
   'A noxious weed...,' 'That’s what it is, he says.' (176-177)

42 Now one question is this: does the segment “a vague, sly gibberish running through all the hills” apply to “Chatter and clatter of leaves”, or to the short replicas that follow? The punctuation is of no help and my own view is that it can apply to both statements provided we remember the polysemy of “curse”: it is not only an evil, a misfortune, but also any type of utterance marked by malediction or execration. In other words, it is a speech act, where the semantic contents of the word combine with its phonic quality to produce effects and affects. For using language is performative, it is an act in itself — here, a “perlocutory act.” It does not seem far-fetched to go beyond the literal meaning, and consider that it might also refer to the sentence passed on Alf, namely the verdict uttered by the judge whose name might be “Patterson”. The narrative provides no definite answer; as a modernist text it exposes the artist’s awareness that there is no full utterance as such, no definite truth in language.

“The Curse” is an experimental piece of poetic prose that encloses nothing but vacancy and loss, even though, in the meantime, it tries to give consistency to a vocal object, the enigmatic object that points to the division between self and Other. It simply revolves around a missing centre before it reaches an aporetic ending where the last word is to the “birds flying across with jargon of wild cries.” (178)

In it, Prichard’s linguistic practice consists also in mapping moments of silence, blank spaces that integrate the syntagmatic chain. Her discursive strategies disclose the dialectics between the obtrusive presence of words with their phonic quality, absence, and the circularity/erasure of meaning so characteristic of our disenchanted modern world. As the narrative/poetic voice vanishes in the density of the vocal pattern, meaning becomes hermetic and of minor importance; what seems to matter most is the ‘reality’ and music of words as if the weird wailing of birds and trees present in the imaginary scene impinged on the text itself so as to conceal, but not to fill in a void.

As the story progresses, it is as if the dislocated narrative discourse duplicates the inarticulate speech of nature. Those voice effects that rise from the vortex of words constitute a fictional trick that makes absence audible, perceptible, tangible. They also provide a means to compensate for the emptiness of the imaginary scene (empty, derelic, dim, ghostly), for the aloofness of the human voices and for the muteness of “the fawn-coloured bitch” one of the figures of otherness subdued to silence in the Australian context:

But the leaves still chattering, lisping and muttering endlessly of Alf and the fawn-coloured bitch straining over her puppies down in the sunshine. (178)

For it is certainly no accident that the domesticated she-dog is mute; she has perhaps lost her instinct and will not survive her master’s absence in the wild bush:

But prowling beside the door, she sprang at us, the fawn-coloured bitch. Fell back, snarling, too weak to stand, belly sagging, a white bag beneath her. Starved, she crouched waiting for Alf’s return. (178)

Beyond the political metaphor that is never absent from Prichard’s novels and short stories, I would argue that “The Curse” is a piece of fiction whose sonorous texture strives to veil the gaping void caused by all forms of curse/malediction that endanger man and his environment. Susannah Prichard was a prolific writer and a militant; in her mind “Patterson’s curse” was perhaps an apt metaphor for both the evil of World War I and the inequities between races, nationalities and classes that have paved the way for democracy in Australia.

NOTES

6. Whereas the word “reader” designates the agent of the reading process itself, “audience” applies to the specific group, the contemporary reading public, to whom an author originally addresses the text. It is the audience that plays an active role in the creation of the work itself; ideally, the text comes as a response to the audience’s desires and expectations: “Un texte postule son destinataire comme condition sine qua non de sa propre capacité communicative concrète mais aussi de sa propre potentialité significatrice.”, Umberto Eco, Lector in fabula. Le rôle du lecteur, Biblios, 1985 (1979), 64.
8. For example: “Mahoney winked at Regan—a wink you could hear—and it comforted them mightily. (72); [...] “he had enough hair on his chest to stuff a set of buggy cushions.” (71).
11. For example: “One more drink for the last.”, 66; “It was too much like shooting at a man.”, 70.
13. “Et de même que, attribué à la machine, le bruissement n’est que le bruit d’une absence de bruit, de même, reporté à la langue, il serait ce sens qui fait entendre, une exemption de sens, ou – c’est la même chose – ce non-sens qui ferait entendre au loin un sens désormais libéré de toutes les agressions dont le signe, formé dans la ‘triste et sauvage histoire des hommes”, est la boîte de Pandore.”, Roland Barthes, “Le bruissement de la langue” (1975), Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV, Paris, Points Seuil, 1984, 101.

ABSTRACTS

tradition orale, sait également tirer parti de la langue vernaculaire pour le plus grand plaisir du lecteur. Dans un tout autre genre, la courte pièce de prose poétique intitulée “The Curse” adopte résolument une esthétique moderniste qui atteste l’influence des auteurs anglais (dont D.H. Lawrence) sur K.S. Prichard. L’intrigue s’efface devant le traitement accordé à la substance langagière : paradoxalement, la texture phonique de cette nouvelle, les effets de voix, les silences qui ponctuent l’énoncé, échouent à masquer le sentiment prédominant de vide et de perte.

AUTHORS

DENISE GINFRAY

Denise Ginfray is Professor of English and American Literature at the University Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand II. She is the author of a doctoral dissertation on Virginia Woolf and has published extensively on Woolf’s fiction and essays. Her main research field is Modernism in Anglo-American literature. Her special interests are modernist writing and aesthetics, literary theory and criticism, literary genres (the novel and the short story), relationships between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literature, between modernism and postmodernism. She has published numerous articles in these areas, notably on Gertrude Stein, Joseph Conrad, Edith Wharton. Her publications also include a book entitled Edith Wharton. L’objet et ses fictions as well as articles on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Atwood, Raymond Carver, and Elizabeth Bishop. She is currently working on Anaïs Nin and W.D. Howells.
Taking the performance to the page: Stories from the South Pacific

Heidi Van den Heuvel-Disler

KAHAWAI

All right then. One morning I got up late and hurried to the kitchen. He was up before me and would have the jug boiling, the pan plugged in, the bread popped down, I thought. Instead he was in the front room looking out. Because the gulls had gathered out at sea, under cloud, and were chasing, calling, falling to the water. Up, chase, drop. Screaming. There's fish, he said. It brought juices. Kahawai, beating green and silver through purple water, herding the herrings which exited the gulls, which excited me . . .

(...)

Lines, bait, knife, hooks, sinkers, jerseys, towel, apples, can of two-stroke, putt-putt motor, rowlocks, oars. Push the dinghy out and sidle out past the weed. He winds the rope and pulls, tries again and then we're away putt-putting out over the navy blue, under cloud, stopping for a while to remove the sinkers from the lines and to bait the hooks with the heads of soldier fish. Then away again to where the gulls swarm above the swarming kahawai that herd the swarming herrings. One fish each will do. Then we are in the middle of it, the darting, leaping little fish crack open the dark water, leap and splash, the gull's eye singling out one, the eye of the kahawai on another. Gulls swooping, following, rising, diving, rising, swallowing, turning, following. And the kahawai zigging, zagging, leaping, shooting through the water, beating silver on the surface of it. Hundreds. But for us two will do. (244-5)

1 This fragment comes from “Kahawai,” a story by Patricia Grace¹. Grace, who is of Maori ancestry, has published several novels, story collections, and some children’s books over the last thirty years.

2 From its vocabulary it immediately becomes clear that “Kahawai” is not a transcription of a traditional story, and yet an experienced reader will almost certainly recognise that in form as well as in content it refers to the oral use of language. Consequently, the question arises to what extent this written text can be associated with oral
performance techniques in the Maori tradition. In this paper I will argue that this type of text can be regarded as a storytelling event.

The Maori storyteller and Walter Benjamin

For those who are not familiar with the oral culture of the Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa - New Zealand, it can be useful to turn to Walter Benjamin's rendering of the storyteller or “der Erzähler”; to a large extent his description of the interaction between storyteller and audience within a shared cultural context also applies to the traditional Maori context. The most significant difference between Benjamin's storyteller and the Maori tohunga lies in the fact that the latter used to be educated in all tribal knowledge that was publicly available, and – in addition to that - was trained in the upkeep of sacred and therefore restricted knowledge.

Unlike the situation in most parts of the Western world, contemporary Maori people have maintained the art of storytelling, also referred to as the informal variant of oratory. Such public speeches or take may contain jokes, word play, myths, historical accounts, proverbs, protocols, practical knowledge, and arguments (Salmond 58-62). Stories, therefore, serve an educational, as well as an entertaining purpose; they can be strung together by free association, and interwoven with chants. This overlaps with “the nature of every real story,” as Benjamin calls it. “It contains, openly and covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or a maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel ... Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom” (86).

Maori storytelling is about what matters, not about what happens. It deals with affairs relevant to the Maori world and its strong social structures, with the passing on of experience to the next generation. In accordance with Benjamin, it is not concerned with information:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (...) For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. (89-91, my emphasis)

The “accurate, factual account” is not what interests an audience, but the values behind the story (Patterson 156-7). Therefore, Maori storytelling – as life itself - is symbolised by the koru or spiral, for all that is told needs to be shown in its relation to the core body of communal interest, knowledge and spirituality. It relates the present to the past - the living to the dead – and the individual to the communal. In doing so, it relies on the two-way communication between storyteller and audience during the storytelling event.

The storytelling event

Richard Bauman has written extensively on oral performance and the storytelling event. According to Bauman performance is:

[a] mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event. While the term may be employed in an aesthetically neutral sense to designate the actual
conduct of communication (as opposed to the potential for communicative action),
performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of
communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The
analysis of performance – indeed, the very conduct of performance – highlights the
social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process. (1992, 41)

From a meta-level he describes how performance needs to be identified first, before it
can function as such:

Each speech community will make use of a structured set of distinctive
communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalized and
culture-specific ways to key the performance frame, such that all communication
that takes place within that frame is to be understood as performance within that
community. (1978, 16-23)

It is important to my argument that where performance is concerned, Bauman does not
distinguish between the spoken and the written: when rooted in a traditional oral
culture, and when “lettered in the traditional idiom,” a written text can be treated as the
continuation of oral performing art (1978, my emphasis).

Spoken and written language

To bridge the gap between Bauman’s conceptual “lettered-in-the-traditional-idiom”
and a concrete text, I turn to Michael Halliday. He explains that “[s]peech and writing
are two rather different ways of representing our experience.” Written language
represents phenomena as products that can be observed, so it is more static. Spoken
language represents phenomena as processes: the text happens, so it is more dynamic.
What is written down is given the form of an object: most lexical words in written texts
tend to be objects or nouns. Speech is linked to action: what is represented by talking is
often phrased as doings or happenings (81-2). In his terminology a text with obvious
spoken-language features refers to the spoken register, which in turn interlocks with a
specific context. Halliday’s theory of Social Semiotics is centred on this connection:

The notion of register proposes a very intimate relationship of text to context:
indeed, so intimate is that relationship … that the one can only be interpreted by
reference to the other. Meaning is realised in language (in the form of text), which
is thus shaped or patterned in response to the context or situation in which it is
used. To study [a text] is to concentrate on exploring how it is systematically
patterned towards important social ends…. (vii)

Let us now return to “Kahawai,” and see where these theories fit in with an actual text.

How orality appropriates and patterns a written text

KAHAWAI
All right then. One morning I got up late and hurried to the kitchen. He was up
before me and would have the jug boiling, the pan plugged in, the bread popped
down, I thought.

The story starts off with providing a few keys. The title keys into the Maori cultural
context: the sea, fishing, and of course the Maori language, of which the oral register
has more prestige than the written one, for it is the vehicle of poetry, oratory, and the
spiritual. The opening sentence, subsequently, keys into the communication frame of the
performance: a dialogue is established. It can be understood from this phrase that an
audience member, already familiar with the story, has commissioned for it to be told
once again; finally the storytelling decides to give in. “One morning” keys into the storytelling frame. What is to come should be treated as a dialogue between storyteller and audience.

“He” in this context has by no means an alienating effect on the audience; this second character simply does not need any further introduction, for he lives in the same house as the storyteller, and is, therefore, a community member and known to the audience. His usual breakfast preparations “the jug boiling, the pan plugged in, the bread popped down” can be regarded as the first example of a list. I believe that oral language may include two types of lists: the first type is an exhaustive one, containing fixed information that must be remembered in a set order, like genealogies and travel directions; the second type consists of an open set of items as can be found in this story. My theory is that open sets are part of a technique to invite audience participation. This initial paragraph closes with “I thought,” which suggests that the storyteller is speaking from personal experience.

Instead he was in the front room looking out.
Because the gulls had gathered out at sea, under cloud, and were chasing, calling, falling to the water. Up, chase, drop. Screaming. There’s fish, he said. It brought juices. Kahawai, beating green and silver through purple water, herding the herrings which exited the gulls, which excited me . . .

Instead” and “Because” at sentence initial position both follow blank spaces in which there is room for questions - “What had he been doing?” and “Why did he look out; what was there to see?”. After both hypothetical questions – which by their nature will not be included in the text, for they belong to the audience’s realm - the storyteller takes his turn again and answers them. In retrospect the blank lines between the title and the opening sentence can have that same function, just as the gaps between lyrics leave space for the music to set the tone.

Apart from the turn taking, the fragment shows an abundance of action, movement, and colour, characteristic of the spoken register. Therefore, it can be stated that here the visual and sound effects generously fill in for the paralinguistic features of actual spoken language. From this fragment it also becomes clear that full stops are not put to standard use; they indicate breathing space and follow a climax. Together with the alliteration and word play (“herding the herrings”), these features enhance the poetic qualities of this text. Moreover, the repetitions and anaphora stress chains of events and create a rhythm. Sometimes repetitions even link the actions of humans to those of birds and fish (“herding the herrings which exited the gulls, which excited me”).

“There’s fish, he said.” is an example of direct speech in an account by someone else, underlining the mimetic effect. Note that no quotation marks are used in the original text. The storyteller has various possibilities to indicate that this sentence is spoken by someone else: either by a variation in pitch, or through body language. The expression “It brought juices,” could be a literal translation from Maori idiom, perhaps indicating that the scene is mouth-watering to the beholder. Those members in the audience who share the same cultural context as the storyteller will immediately understand. Finally, this section ends with a contemplative pause – an obvious oral marker.

This section shows another example of an open list, which does not only contain essentials. Again, this can be a storytelling technique to encourage the audience to
participate. In addition, we are reminded of the fact that we should not start the motor until we have crossed the patch of seaweed; later on we are taught about the techniques of catching sea trout, and are implicitly told that the fishing tackle should not be prepared in haste: relevant educational elements based on experience are brought into play.

He winds the rope and pulls, tries again and then we’re away putt-putting out over the navy blue, under cloud, stopping for a while to remove the sinkers from the lines and to bait the hooks with the heads of soldier fish.

Then away again to where the gulls swarm above the swarming kahawai that herd the swarming herrings. One fish each will do.

18 Here a significant change of pace and action takes place: the past tense of the first three paragraphs becomes present tense; then and now become one. In “putt-putting” one will recognise theonomatopoeia, whereas “the navy blue” is a pun as well as a metaphor. This section ends with an important Maori code of behaviour: “One fish each will do.” It illustrates the Maori philosophy of dealing with nature: only take as much as is needed.

Then we are in the middle of it, the darting, leaping little fish crack open the dark water, leap and splash, the gull’s eye singling out one, the eye of the kahawai on another. Gulls swooping, following, rising, diving, rising, swallowing, turning, following. And the kahawai zigging, zagging, leaping, shooting through the water, beating silver on the surface of it.

19 The section’s last paragraph opens with another “Then,” adding speed to the sequence of actions that have proceeded, and those coming up. The movements and the metaphors by means of which they are described, however, now become more violent, and the colours become less bright - “crack open the dark water.” “[S]wooping, following, rising, diving, rising, swallowing, turning, following” is another sequence of actions which conjures up strong intonation and body movements, just like “zigging, zagging, leaping, shooting, beating” which includes more aggressive action and the coining of new words.

Hundreds. But for us two will do.

20 “Hundreds.” This one word, marked by breathing space before and after, is almost a sigh in itself. “But” then follows, almost as a warning - one can imagine the index finger and the pitch of the voice rise - before the audience dares react to this wealth of fish in a greedy and un-Maori way. The section closes with repeating the Maori code of behaviour in slightly different wording. It almost sounds like a slogan now, meant to sink in and never to be forgotten.

21 After having gone through the text in this way, I would now like to pose three questions, and provide possible answers.

Who are the actors in relation to this text?

22 Apart from the author and the readers, essential to bring a text alive, this text creates the role of a storyteller who communicates with an audience in the process of passing on experience and re-affirming communal knowledge. To approach “Kahawai” in such a way, readers need to recognise the keys to the storytelling frame, and be acquainted with the cultural context to which it relates. This type of reader will go along with being “stage-managed” into the audience position - playing that double role. An
outsider to the Maori cultural context is excluded from, or will only be able to partially participate in, this double role.

What is the function of texts like these? In other words, what can be regarded as Halliday’s “important social ends”?

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961) Frantz Fanon expressed his views on how native intellectuals should proceed when leading the way to de-colonising their indigenous culture by means of literature. Initially, they were to aim at the rehabilitation of the indigenous pre-colonial culture through the revival of oral genres – stories, epics, and songs of the people, to bring to light once more the “dignity, glory, and solemnity” of pre-colonial times, necessary in the therapeutic process of dealing with the traumatic experience of colonisation (210). Once the indigenous culture was liberated from the shame and ridicule imposed on it by the coloniser, only then could imagination and creativity start to develop:

... the native writer (...) takes on the habit of addressing his own people. (...) The storyteller once more gives free rein to his imagination; he makes innovations and he creates a work of art. (...) The storyteller replies to the expectant people by successive approximations, and makes his way, apparently alone but in fact helped on by his public, toward the seeking out of new patterns. (240-1)

In the South Pacific region, indigenous writers *did* read Fanon, and they *did* find his theories not that much removed from their own circumstances, possibilities, and desires. It would be an exaggeration to claim that without Fanon, texts like these would not exist in this form, but it certainly helps understand the political impact of this type of literature, which, in fact, started to appear in the early 1970s, and coincided with what now is referred to as the Maori Renaissance.

However, this literature deals with more than “just” the de-colonisation process of the Maori people. In the 1960s the consequences of land alienation in combination with extensive urbanisation led to social disruption. Communities fell apart, and the upkeep of communal knowledge was no longer possible by means of the oral storytelling event. An alternative medium was needed to counter further fragmentation – a medium that had as much Maoriness to it as possible.

What consequences does this have for the reception of texts like these?

Texts like these invoke contrasting receptions, even with professional readers. We have looked at keys to the performance frame, but of course there are other types of keys as well. “Kahawai” is part of a book – written and printed in English, not in Maori - which conforms to the conventions of a written text, in so far that it offers a table of contents and page numbers; each story has a title set in bold and italics. This cluster of features gives rise to expectations that may seem unambiguous, but that prove to be culture-specific. To add to the opaqueness of the corpus, some of Grace’s texts *can* be interpreted as belonging to the modernist tradition, lacking all performance techniques; others are written on the cutting edge of both cultural repertoires. Taking
all this into account, Western readers will most likely key into the frame of the short story (the blurb-text on the back of Collected Stories, quoting the NZ-listener, calls Grace a short-story writer) a modern fictional genre of Western origin. Having done this, they will perceive a sense of estrangement and mystification, and relate this to certain (post)modernist narrative techniques. It is ironic that where the strengthening of coherence and unity are intended, the opposite can be achieved, and that a broad readership associates exactly this alienation with the literary qualities of the text.

This misreading of generic keys is not just a matter of inexperience; even perceptive literary critics seem troubled by what I would like to call “supposedly conflicting registers”. “[Events are] told in a mixture of stream-of-consciousness dialogue, (not ‘interior monologue’ but talking to herself as if to someone else) ...” (Pearson 181). Through his wording Pearson illustrates his puzzlement, when wanting to deal with a text that represents the storytelling event. I would like to add one more example by another critic, who sticks even more strictly to the conventional frame of reference. According to David Norton, Grace’s stories show a lack of coherent purpose: “the reader should have, as he reaches the last word of a story, a sense of the whole story he has read. A progressive sense of discovery is needed... the result is confusion.” Norton almost demands a linear story line, leaving no room for free association. “Less important, but still a worry, is the minimal punctuation. This book is likely to be used in schools, but such punctuation will not help to give young readers a sense of the clarity and meaningfulness of language” (330-2). It may be a comfort to know that Grace (as well as other writers in the South Pacific region) has continued to apply her oral storytelling techniques for almost thirty years now.

In an interview, Patricia Grace has stated that she does associate with the figure of the oral storyteller. “I think that written stories are just an extension of our oral storytelling – not superior to, not inferior to it; just another aspect of it. We are people of [today] who express our culture in many ways, in every way available – just as our ancestors did. They used everything that was available” (Sarti 50, my emphasis). Against this background I claim that authors like Grace effectively merge storytelling-before-an-audience and writing into a new type of text: the written storytelling event. Even though this literature is presented in the written mode, it unambiguously refers to the oral register, for it contains and refers to all that is important to the Maori cultural context: the sea, fishing, co-operating, good humour, sharing, and mores in regards to natural resources. And of course the love for language, poetry, and storytelling. It will be most interesting to see how second and third generations of Maori authors deal with this issue of continuity, and whether they will stick to these newly developed writing techniques, or turn to the spoken word once again, in the way of drama and poetry.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. Repetitions and constant time shifts are brought about by the necessity of referring to “what matters,” as by the associative character of an oral tradition.
3. Apart from following Benjamin’s, Bauman’s, and Halliday’s ideas, I am indebted to Finnegan and Ong, to Anne Salmond’s description of Maori oratory, and to Bruce Biggs’s introduction to the Maori language.
4. In interviews both Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera have indicated having read Fanon.
Dans une partie importante de son œuvre, l’auteur Maori Patricia Grace emploie des techniques narratives et des thèmes qui remontent à la tradition orale de la culture Maori avant l’arrivée des Européens. Par l’analyse d’un extrait de texte que l’on peut considérer comme caractéristique de ce genre de littérature, cet article montre que l’écrit sert l’événement de l’énonciation narrative. Il aborde la question de l’identité des acteurs de l’événement et de sa traduction dans le langage. A la lumière des théories de la description du conteur de Walter Benjamin, des structures narratives de Richard Bauman, de la sémiotique sociale de Michael Halliday et de la philosophie du rôle décolonisateur de l’intellectuel indigène de Frantz Fanon, il s’agit de montrer que dans le Pacifique Sud, des textes écrits contenant un certain nombre d’éléments du conte traditionnel peuvent être considérés comme des marqueurs de continuité culturelle.

HEIDI VAN DEN HEUVEL-DISLER

Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler (1957) teaches postcolonial literatures at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, and is finalising a PhD project concerning the continuation of oral storytelling traditions in written texts. Her research involves a case study of the fictional writing of four South Pacific authors Albert Wendt, Sia Figiel, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Apart from having written articles on this topic, she co-edited the CDS Research Report (no.23) on the family in contemporary post-colonial fiction.
“My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence...”, or The Vocalisation of Silence in Caribbean short stories by Edwige Danticat

Judith Misrahi-Barak

The title of this paper is extracted from one of the short stories by the Haitian writer Edwige Danticat, “The Book of the Dead”, the first story in her second collection *The Dew Breaker*. This reference to the Egyptian Book of the Dead seemed to fit perfectly the core idea of this paper as it lays stress on the two horizons that seem to open up within the notion of “orality”.

If the focus used to be more on “primary orality”, defined by Walter J. Ong as “that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing” (Ong 1988 : 6), it seems that the centre of perspective has shifted over the past few decades towards a “secondary orality”, one that “depends on writing and print for its existence” (3). Since the late 1980s, many writers, academics and critics have insisted on the interplay between speech and writing, orality and literacy. As Kenneth Ramchand demonstrates in an article published the same year as Ong’s study, this interplay emerges at its best in the English-speaking Caribbean since “Caribbean societies may be defined as societies in which the mind-set of primary orality coexists with the mind-set of high literacy.” (Ramchand 1988 : 107). Indeed, in the 20th century, the oral culture inherited from slavery days and African ancestry has been mingling with the written culture inherited from colonization and the Western world. Ramchand insists too on the fact that the combination of such a rich oral heritage and of the intricacies and complexities of the written word account for the “much admired vitality in West Indian writing” (108).

Many West Indian writers have taken advantage of the interrelationships between the oral and the written word in fiction and poetry — Louise Bennett, Dionne Brand, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Fred D’Aguiar, Lorna Goodison, Velma Pollard, Denis Scott, Andrew Salkey, Sam Selvon, Derek Walcott, and so many others who write both to the eye and to the ear.
Yet, all the Caribbean writers do not weave orality and literacy together in the same way, depending on the period of writing and on their background mostly. If the earlier generations had a tendency to separate the voice of the narration from the voice of the characters, the closing of the gap between narration and characters became more and more pregnant in Caribbean fiction writing. Also, if a majority of writers seems to have worked on the penetration of oral forms upon the written forms, some writers have also looked at the penetration of writing upon the oral consciousness, as well as at all the crossovers between orality and literacy, composing the figures of a new Caribbean syncreticity.

If orality seems to be best grasped in its relationships with its most obvious opposite — literacy, or the written word — it also has to be grasped through its other opposite — silence, and this is where reading Danticat can be so enlightening because the young Haitian writer has a definition of the crossovers between orality, literacy and silence that belongs to herself only. In the context of the Caribbean short story, orality has often been pigeonholed as being linked mostly, if not only, with the use of creole, or dialect. This is hardly the case for Danticat, and yet orality permeates her stories, but it is an orality which is constantly played against the gaps between the words, the ellipses, and ultimately against silence. I would like in this paper to insist on the linguistic, thematic, stylistic, narrative and political as well as ontological use of silence in her short fiction, without which no voice can indeed be heard. It is my hypothesis that silence is used as theme and technique in her stories, making orality stream in, alongside the reconfiguration of self.

Edwige Danticat, who has lived in the US since the age of twelve, has published two collections of short stories: *Krik ? Krak!* which launched her as a major writer, and the recent *The Dew Breaker*, in which all the stories intimately echo each other. In fact, both collections are short story cycles, and in both, the burden of the untold history is such that it nearly crushes its characters. The whole point of Danticat's stories is to voice those words that have been bottled up for too long, all the unsaid, all the unspeakable things unsaid, to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase, all the repressed suffering. I would first like to examine the structural and narratological tools that Danticat gives herself in order to create this new resonance. All the echoes that the text creates within itself will indeed bring out a new voice and consciousness.

Both collections are short story cycles, defined by Forrest Ingram as “a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit.” (Ingram 1971 : 15). Using the definition by Ingram, Rocio Davis also adds that such a collection “must assert the individuality and independence of each of the component parts while creating a necessary interdependence that emphasizes the wholeness and unity of the work. Consistency of theme and an evolution from one story to the next are among the classic requirements of the form.” (Davis 2001 : 66). Form is actually used in order to present the main components of the collection, ie the interaction between uniting and separating the individual and the community — how distinct? how indissociable? — as well as the problematics of self-definition within a displaced community. The links between the individual and its community, be it host or native, may be analogical to those existing between the stories of the collections, all devoted to the depicting of the Haitian individual, in Haiti or in the diaspora, and this is one of the ways Danticat merges theme and technique. In order to ascertain first that Danticat uses a secondary
orality that depends on writing and print for its existence, and only then set into perspective the constant interaction of speech and silence, I think it essential to give a few examples of the intertextual echoes of the two collections of stories.

7 Thematically speaking, some stories are devoted to the more than difficult social, political and economic situation of Haitians at home, mostly women but not only (“A Wall of Fire Rising”, or “The Missing Peace” for instance), others to the dilemmas of emigration (“Children of the Sea” again, “New York Day Women”, or “Caroline’s Wedding”), all of them compose a web of words, stories and narratives, rising against the wall of silence that was maintained by the Duvaliers dynasty, father and son, until 1986, and by a history of colonisation and invasion. Numerous stories address history as the great silencer, or rather the history makers — in *Krik ? Krak!* “Children of the Sea” literally gives a voice to those in the 1980s who tried to flee the country on board little boats as well as to those who stayed in Haiti; “Nineteen-Thirty Seven” takes as background the massacre of Haitians organized by the Dominican General Trujillo in 1937, and the silencing that has ensued for generations, echoed ever so forcefully by the silence imposed through torture by the Haitian *tontons macoutes* during the dictatorship, a period that is also covered in “The Missing Peace” in the same collection. *The Dew Breaker* takes up those early threads from the first collection to weave them more tightly, dealing more specifically with the period of the Duvaliers, the silence, the torture, the violence of it — “The Book of the Dead”, “Monkey Tails” and “The Dew Breaker” particularly.

8 In fact both collections bring the stories together in a network of characters passing from one story to another, echoes, reminiscences, and intertextual allusions that have to be deciphered by the reader himself. For instance, on the level of characters, in the last story of *Krik ? Krak!*, Grace, the narrator and Caroline’s sister, and her mother, attend a funeral service which the reader understands is for the pregnant girl, Célianne, who was on the boat trying to reach the American coast in the first story “Children of the Sea” : “‘We make a special call today for a young woman whose name we don’t know’, the priest said after he had recited all the others. ‘A young woman who was pregnant when she took a boat from Haiti and then later gave birth to her child on that boat...’” (Danticat 1996 : 167). Célianne’s death, instead of being swallowed by the sea she was hoping would help her in her flight, will not be completely shrouded in silence since there is still an echo of her in the last story. In “Between the Pool and the Gardenias”, the main character looks after a dead baby that she has found on the street, haunted and disturbed as she is by all her miscarriages. She is related to other characters in other stories in the collection, “Nineteen-Thirty Seven” and “Wall of Fire Rising” particularly:

> There was my grandmother Eveline who was killed by Dominican soldiers at the Massacre river. My grandmother Défilé who died with a bald head in a prison, because god had given her wings. My godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son left her to go to Miami. (94)

9 Parallel to the bonds that are formed between characters, often women, we also find echoes to merge the stories one with the other : the song *Beloved Haiti* that is mentioned in “Children of the Sea” is actually sung in “Caroline’s Wedding”, bringing the wheel full circle. The narrator of “Between the Pool and the Gardenias” calls out all the names she would have liked to give to her child: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalène, Célianne — all names of characters in the stories of the collection.
Symbolically speaking, clusters of images are also used in order to make the stories coalesce, echo one another and speak back to you. The butterfly flutters its way in and out of the stories, becoming “a symbol of both continuing life and transformation” (Davis 2001: 70). The girl who has stayed in Haiti in “Children of the Sea” for instance says: “I don’t sketch my butterflies anymore because I don’t even like seeing the sun. Besides, manman says that butterflies can bring news. The bright ones bring happy news and the black ones warn us of deaths.” (Danticat 1996: 5) And indeed, a black butterfly will land on her hand at the end of the story. The butterfly reappears in “Night Women”, when the female narrator gazes at her son sleeping, comparing him with “a butterfly fluttering on a rock that stands out naked in the middle of a stream.” (85). The dead baby of “Between the Pool and the Gardenias” wears a “butterfly collar”. The girl narrator in “The Missing Peace”, close to the adolescent who works for the military, is “playing with leaves shaped like butterflies.” (103). The symbol of the butterfly is even carried into another collection of which Danticat was the editor, The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States, an Anthology.

The desire for escape, translated literally into images of flight, also inhabits the stories. Dreams of flight lead Guy to his death in “A Wall of Fire Rising” as he falls from a hot-air balloon. The imprisoned women in “Ninety-Thirty Seven” are brutalized by the guards who thought they were witches developing wings and flying away at night, so instrumentalized they were by the regime that had been using Haitian vodou myths to create an atmosphere of paranoia, hatred and violence.

Death, of adults, children, and often infants, is another motif that haunts all the stories, sewing them all up together, bringing together the individual and its community, reuniting in the case of “Children of the Sea” the refugees and the Africans, dead or alive, thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Célianne gives birth to a stillborn child, and joins her in the water over board. The girl-narrator of “The Missing Peace” is called Lamort because her mother died in childbirth, unwittingly transmitting this legacy of death to her daughter. In “Between the Pool and the Gardenias”, the disturbed tentative mother retrieves the corpse of a discarded newborn baby and nurses it: “In the city, I hear they throw out whole entire children. They throw them out anywhere: on doorsteps, in garbage cans, at gas pumps, sidewalks. In the time that I had been in Port-au-Prince, I had never seen such a child until now.” (93) Death is everywhere.

The same narrative interweaving and echoing is used in The Dew Breaker, in which the rarely seen former torturer is in fact the main protagonist, refracted in the consciousness of his wife and daughter, in the nightmares of his neighbours and former victims. The collection moves from 1960s Haiti to present-day New York where the eponymous ‘dew breaker’ has moved, trying to make a new life for himself and his family. In “The Book of the Dead”, the narrator-focalizer, Ka, a sculptor who has made a statue of her father, has always believed she is the daughter of a former victim of the Duvalier dictatorship. But the confrontation, through the statue, of the image he has of himself, proves too much for the father who flees in distress. When he comes back, he can do nothing but embark into a confession: “You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey.” (Danticat 2004: 20) Ka is going to fit to the Egyptian etymology of her name: “A ka is a double of the body, [...] the body’s companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead.” (17). The Book of the Dead is indeed a valid...
metaphor for Ka’s journey, “dead hearts being placed on scales and souls traveling aimlessly down fiery underground rivers”. But there is hope in the uncovering of silence through oral confession in the written text.

14 The presence of the dew breaker is seen lurking from one story to another. In “Night Talkers”, Dany’s parents were killed by that same man who has become a barber in New York. In “The Bridal Seamstress”, the retired bridal seamstress who is being interviewed by a young journalist, while constantly postponing the moment of delivery of speech, is one of his former victims: “We called them choukèt laroze,’ Beatrice said [...] ‘they’d break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they’d also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away. He was one of them, the guard.” (131) He haunts her like a ghost from her former life: “This man, wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him, living on my street.” (132).

The last story in the collection, “The Dew Breaker”, gathers all the threads, and gives all the missing clues — how the abduction of a preacher turned sour, how the guard got his scar, how he had to flee the country.

15 The intricacies of the intertextual echoes between the stories have hopefully been made clear now, which shows that an effet d’oralité (of the same type as Barthes’s effet de reel) is actually obtained through the organization of the written space, of the echoes that reverberate between written voices, of the reflections that flutter from one motif to the next. A writer can be involved in a dialectics of orality, and also involve the reader, without actually using the obvious tools of orality, dialect or creole, or very little. Orality can also materialize elsewhere and find another mode of being.

16 Not only are the two collections moulded after an oral tradition of narrative in the way each story echoes the other ones, but one may say that the stories are soaked in orality. Even the title is already an indication of it, a call-response which is an invitation to take part — the storyteller says Krik ? and the audience answers Krak ! both stepping into the fictional world of the story, as well as into the world of orality. Rocio Davis in her article argues that:

The short story cycle looks back to oral traditions of narrative while embodying signs of modernity. One of its most salient features is its attempt to emulate the act of storytelling, the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related. (Davis 2001 : 66)

17 The intertextual allusions that I have underlined (and that are examined in detail by Davis) are a means to establish the connection between storyteller and audience, making them actively participate in the narration. Danticat uses many other ways to foreground orality — the second-person narration in the epilogue of Krik ? Krak ! “Women Like Us” for instance is also a means to enter into immediate contact with the addressee/narratee. Thematically speaking, storytelling figures in several of the stories: in “Children of the Sea” the refugees tell each other stories to pass the time: “We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik ? You answer, Krak ! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves.” (Danticat 1996 : 14). Speech is the only refuge available to the boat refugees, providing a tenuous but organic link between people, a paradoxical link too since in Haiti words were often forced out of people’s mouths. Trinh T. Minh-ha speaks of storytelling as “the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community”, underlining that the coloured women writers have often chosen to “un-learn” the dominant language by “re-establishing the contact with
[their] foremothers, so that living tradition can never congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link with the Present and the Future.” (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1990: 148-149).

Verbal rituals of recognition are also repeatedly played in the stories of the collection when it is necessary re-establish a lost connection with people or with the past: in “Caroline’s Wedding” mother and daughter have kept up a question-and-answer game which harks back to ‘Nineteen-Thirty Seven’ and to the secret society formed by the women at the time of the massacre:

I remembered a Jacqueline who went on the trips with us, but I was not sure this was the same woman. If she were really from the river, she would know. She would know all the things that my mother had said to the sun as we sat with our hands dipped in the water, questioning each other, making up codes and disciplines by which we could always know who the other daughters of the river were. (Danticat 1996: 44)

The obsession with saying, telling, narrating, is kept up in The Dew Breaker and even emphasized. In “Night Talkers”, the young man whose parents were killed by the macoutes goes back to his village in Haiti to see his aunt who has raised him before he emigrated to the US. Aunt and nephew are alike in that: “They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds, not with urine but with words. He too spoke his dreams aloud in the night, to the point of sometimes jolting himself awake with the sound of his own voice.” (Danticat 2004: 98). Another character in the story, Claude, an Haitian-born young man who was expelled from the US after committing patricide, is also a palannit. After the death of Dany’s aunt, at her burial, Dany keeps Claude speaking: “Claude was already one of them, a member of their tribe. Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves. Except Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others…” (120) By speaking out their nightmares, an effet d’oralité is called up. Words are once again used to raise a wall against suffering and keep silence at bay. As the narrator of the Epilogue says in Krik ? Krak!: “Silence terrifies you more than the pounding of a million pieces of steel chopping away at your flesh.” (Danticat 1996: 223).

Speech and voice, the absolute, vital, adamant necessity of it, certainly form the backbone of the two collections, but the obsession with saying, telling, narrating, is very effectively paralleled by the obsession with silence, as if one was supporting the other. Silence is made to function in the text in a dual and paradoxical way: speech is certainly geared against silence, and the virtues of words are being waged in the healing process, be it on the torturer’s side, as in the father’s confession in “The Book of the Dead”, or on the victim’s side, as in “The Bridal Seamstress”. But silence is also worked into the text as an empowering tool. If silence is a tool of oppression, it can also be used as a tool of liberation, just as language and literature were once used in the imperialist scheme and revertsly in the decolonising process. When Myriam Chancy dedicates herself to articulating women’s absences and silences in Haitian history and literature, she argues that the absences that are uncovered are also significant as “sites of affirmation”: “It is through the consciousness of absence, then, that identity is recovered and preciously defended.” (Chancy 1997: 16). In order to define her Haïtiennité, she elaborates the concept of culture-lacune, based on her own former definition of herself filled with gaps, holes, lacunes. In all the novels by Haitian women that she analyzes in her study, “absence is palpable in the form of marginalization. But
from this marginalization emerges a sense of a women's culture that defines herself 
*through its silencing.*” (16-17). In Danticat’s short stories, silence is indeed used in order 
to reveal the burden that has been crushing Haitian women to this day, but by doing so, 
it becomes a tool for self-expression. It is through silence that the retrieval of voice 
appears to be made accessible.

Technically speaking, Danticat does it in a number of ways, but the most striking one is 
the way she uses monologue and dialogue, as well as the different types of speech. In 
“Children of the Sea”, the text is visually split between the young man who has left 
Haiti on a refugee boat, and his girlfriend who has stayed. The distance between the 
two interlocutors is a maximal one since they are physically separated, the speaker and 
the listener being fused into one and the same person; yet they are communicating 
with each other, using the second person singular to reestablish the missing connection — the boy is writing his diary on scraps of paper and the girl is talking to him, almost 
responding, though in a discrepant way. The fact that communication is closed upon 
itself not only heightens the pathos but also ties in with what is being said in the story. 
The context is that of the darker years of the Duvaliers regime in the 1980s, one of 
silencing and abducting, systematic rape and torture. The boy had taken part in 
resistance actions that involved a radio broadcast, the private voice thus being 
projected into the public sphere. The girl tells him how her father wants her to “throw 
out those tapes of your radio shows. i destroyed some music tapes, but i still have your 
voice. I thank god you got out when you did. all the other youth federation members 
have disappeared. no one has heard from them.” (Danticat 1996 : 4). It is also one of the 
fears of the boy: “We go under and no one hears from us again.” (6). It seems as if the 
text itself was obsessed with words, oral and written, all the words that have been 
forced out, extorted, violently pulled out of people:

> Last night they came to madan roger’s house. papa hurried inside as soon as madan 
> roger’s screaming started. [...] they were shouting at her, do you belong to the 
> youth federation with those vagabonds who were on the radio ? she was yelling, do 
> i look like a youth to you ? can you identify your son’s other associates ? they asked 
> her. [...] she cursed on their mothers’ graves. [...] they kept at it, asking her 
> questions at the top of their voices : was your son a traitor ? tell me all the names of 
> his friends who were traitors just like him. madan roger finally shouts, yes, he was 
> one ! he belonged to that group. he was on the radio. [...] they start to pound at her. 
> you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they 
> are cracking all the bones in her body. manman whispers to papa, you can’t just let 
> them kill her. (16)

21 It seems to me that in the way her text actually makes silence heard, on both sides of 
the Atlantic, Danticat reproduces the complexity of this association of speech and 
silence — the macoutes are reducing the opposition to silence, they say they want 
information, yet we know that the aim of torture is not to obtain information but 
simply to spread terror; madan roger does not give them new names, she gives them 
information they already have. The family of the girl disagrees over whether they 
should intervene, they listen in, the father forcing his wife to remain silent. Silence is 
linked to existence — if you don’t give any names, if you keep silent, you will go on 
existing.

22 On the boat, stories are being told to pass the time and keep up hope. On the boat, 
words, stories, tears, screams, vomit and groans are brought into a frightening 
equation: “Some of the women sing and tell stories to each other to appease the
vomiting.” (9) Orality is as much defined here by eating (not much) and vomiting, as by screaming and telling stories:

The pregnant girl, Célianne, I don’t know how she takes it. [...] I have never seen her eat. [...] She woke up screaming the other night. [...] Some water started coming into the boat in the spot where she was sleeping. There is a crack at the bottom of the boat that looks as though [...] it will split the boat in two. The captain [...] used some tar to clog up the hole. (10)

When she gives birth, it is Célianne herself who becomes the vacant hole: “I have moved to the other side of the boat so I will not have to look inside Célianne. People are just watching. The captain asks the midwife to keep Célianne steady so she will not rock any more holes into the boat. Now we have three cracks covered with tar.” (18).

Danticat uses the device of a dialogue that is in fact the juxtaposition of two monologues while adding some variations according to the necessities of the story. In “New York Day Women” a young woman watches her mother as she is walking the New York streets. The text delivers in parallel the two streams of consciousness, visually differentiated on the page — and this is another proof if need be of the importance of the organization of the written space in the problematics of speech and silence. But beyond the physical silence worming its way into the page, a strange kind of dialogue unwittingly operates between the two women as they seem to respond to each other in spite of the cross-generational and cross-cultural divide. In “Night Women” a prostitute speaks her thoughts while her son is asleep. In the three stories mentioned, silence is at the heart of speech, but the consciousness of it brings the characters closer to the constitution of a self outside and away from silence.

The second device Danticat uses is the manipulation of the different types of speech. In “Children of the Sea”, because there is no possibility of a direct dialogue between the two protagonists, which accounts for the fact that indirect speech and free indirect speech are quite obviously dominant — “she asked me what really happened to you. she said she saw your parents before they left for the provinces. they did not want to tell her anything. i told her you took a boat after they raided the radio station.” (13); the other passage where madan roger is beaten up by the macoutes is also a case in point, the confrontation being thoroughly organized through the way speech is actually split up. The fact other people are listening in, trying not to make themselves heard, also comes across in the doubleness of free indirect speech.

That the basis of speech is silence is nothing new in western thinking. In an article about Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir *The Woman Warrior* and African-Caribbean Canadian women writers like Marlene Nourbese Philip and Makeda Silvera, Richard Teleky sums it up perfectly: “Writers live poised between the power of silence and the power of language. Silence is essential not only to the writing process itself but to the process of building an identity as a writer. In a quite literal sense, claiming and transforming silence is a crucial aspect of finding a voice.” (Teleky 2001: 207). Edwige Danticat wages her battle with silence in such a way that it enables her to transform it into an act of self-discovery, self-definition and ultimately an act of liberation. This is the process in which Josephine is involved in “Nineteen-Thirty Seven”, how not to be struck dumb any more. If it is true that a writer can be involved in a dialectics of orality, without actually using the obvious tools of orality, it is also true that silence, when inserted within the text, heightens the possibility of speech. In incorporating the orality of silence within the written words of her stories, in using silence against
silence, in turning it inside out like a glove, Danticat’s stories of oppression are converted into narratives of self-narration and self-empowerment.

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ABSTRACTS

L’oralité dans la littérature a souvent été associée à l’utilisation du créole ou du dialecte, surtout dans le contexte caribéen où l’anglais, plus ou moins créolisé, est la seule langue, et où tant d’influences se sont mélangées, du conte africain au roman anglais. Mais on peut aussi appréhender le concept et la pratique de l’oralité à travers son interface avec les notions de voix et de silence. L’écrivain haitienne Edwige Danticat, auteur des deux recueils de nouvelles *Krik ? Krak!* et *The Dew Breaker* et qui écrit en anglais, amène à la surface du texte l’histoire non dite, source de souffrance, et utilise aussi le silence tant comme thème que comme outil rhétorique. La façon dont le texte écrit fait résonner la voix qui parle ou la voix qui se tait, la façon dont ce texte
s'organise autour de la voix et du silence, contribue à transformer un texte d'oppression en texte de libération.

AUTHORS

JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK

Judith Misrahi-Barak, Maître de Conférences HDR, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III, France, read English Literature at the University of Paris III and at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Fontenay-aux-Roses. She wrote her Doctorate on the Writing of childhood in Caribbean literature (1996). She has published many articles on Caribbean writers belonging to the Caribbean diaspora, as well as on African-Caribbean-Canadian authors, in Commonwealth, Alizés, Annales du Monde Anglphone, Journal of the Short-Story in English… as well as an interview with Cyril Dabydeen in Commonwealth (2001).
The intrinsic written quality of the spoken word in Olive Senior's short fiction

Marie-Annick Montout

1 Complex linguistic background is a crucial dimension of Olive Senior's characterization. Her command of voice demonstrates that the contradictions inherent in European values versus indigenous values as encapsulated in the word can be transcended by the word. In her short stories orality forms an intimate part of the narrators' artful mode of writing as their insurgency and/or that of the characters against the English canon lies in the choice of topics and language. The narrators are often members of the community who recall a particular event in the community life or in their own life as members of the community, and who choose Jamaican English as the medium for communication. The borders between the written word and the spoken word become all the more blurred as the narrators choose to show speech rather than to describe it, and to offer no overt cushioning for the lexical items which highly deflect from Standard English. Even when the aesthetical value of the oral tradition on which the narrators heavily draw to weave their stories seems to be overtly questioned by reference to the aesthetical canons of the written text, the intricate interplay between the two modes of story telling is paradoxically highlighted.

2 It should be pointed out here that in Jamaica, the linguistic spectrum includes Jamaican Patwa also called Deep Jamaican Creole, i.e. fragmented English speech and syntax developed during the days of slavery with strong African influences, Jamaican English and Standard Jamaican English, i.e. Jamaican English with a high degree of competence in Standard English. Patwa is the basilect whereas Standard Jamaican English is the acrolect. In between the two extremes lies the mesolect or a continuum with various degrees of competence in the acrolect. A Jamaican whose command of English is imperfect speaks Jamaican English.

3 The narrators and characters in Olive Senior's short fiction use mainly Jamaican English with a greater or lesser degree of competence in Standard Jamaican English which may go unnoticed to the non-Jamaican reader inasmuch as the oral/scrribal
language codes combine to mark the difference without losing his/her comprehension. Code switching makes it possible to establish the narrators’ and characters’ counter-discourses. The saying “Cockroach have no business in a fowl roost” is a case in point since it is used again and again, albeit with minor modifications according to how influenced by English values the character is. Working with a family who has adopted English values, Desrine2 does not omit the copula verb “have” – an omission that is characteristic of Jamaican English– when she utters the saying. By contrast, Big Mout Doris3, whose employers are not as closely influenced by proper English, does. It is also interesting to notice that the English name for the locally called Tyrant Flycatcher bird, that is to say “petchary”, is not spelt by the narrator of “The Tenantry of Birds”4 according to the rules of written English, but according to the way it is pronounced, with the omission of the consonant “t”. This variant spelling in a text written in Standard English signals that the narrator remains closely attached to Jamaican culture, a fact which is corroborated by his use of the popular Jamaican name “kling-klings” – whose alternate, more standard orthography is “cling-cling” – to designate blackbirds.

4 Choice of language, in Olive Senior’s fiction, is a channel for the characters’ revolt against the established norm or against its adoption when Jamaican communal values are at stake. Thus, all through her text, the narrator of the short story “Ascot” stigmatises Ascot’s attitude because he betrays his race and culture. She and Ascot were born and raised in the same village, she, to a family with a rather good living standard, and Ascot, to a broken, poor family. The major difference between them is that she remained in the village, that she nonetheless acquired a good command of Jamaican English and that she continued speaking Patwa whereas Ascot left for the United States to improve his lot, which, for him, meant marrying a white American girl, speaking almost perfect Standard Jamaican English, and disclaiming his family origins. The narrator’s strong disapproval of Ascot’s behaviour when he first came back to the village with his wife is expressed through language; she switches to expressions connected with Jamaican culture to clearly show where she stands and where he should stand. For instance, to describe Ascot’s fiery look when it becomes obvious to his wife that he lied about his family origins, she compares him to a “shame-me-lady macca”, a name which is one of the Jamaican names for the mimosa thorn. She also amplifies her father’s sharp criticism of Ascot’s dishonest behaviour by resorting to the image of the rolling calf: “Papa stand there with him mouth open like him seeing rolling calf [...]”. To a similar effect, Saddie calls her sister Muffet “Shame-Brown-Lady”, and “Shamey-Shamey-Lady” because she is trying to remind her that she is mixed-raced and coloured, and that she should not take offence at her origins and shy from them. Nor should she lash out at Saddie when the latter proves her attachment to local culture. So, through words only, the narrator infuses his text with local cultural elements and values, finds the means to create a genuine voice not jarred by the European language norm, and passes on critical comments on attitudes which reject the African past.

5 Because the narrator and the characters communicate via Jamaican English with a greater or lesser degree of proficiency in Standard Jamaican English, distinguishing between narrator and character when free indirect speech makes the narrator’s text resonate with that of a character might prove tricky. The following passage in which, as befits a Jamaican English speaker, the narrator omits the auxiliary verb “be”, and Katie

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1 Journal of the Short Story in English, 47 | Autumn 2006
neither respects the genitive form nor the number concordance between subject and verb form, is an enlightening illustration:

Right now she consoling about Beccka who (as she telling Auntie Mary) every decent-living upright Christian soul who is everybody round here except that Dorcas’ Waite about whom one should not dirty one’s mouth to talk yes every clean living person heart go out to Aunty Mary for with all due respect to a sweet mannersable child like Cherryher daughter is the devil own pickney.  

The narrator so artfully fuses his and Katie’s voice that, were it not for his comment in brackets which acts as a warning, that part of Katie’s narrative might be read as offering his own point of view from beginning to end. Yet, the narrator has already intimated that he sides with Beccka, which makes it totally improbable that he shares Katie’s point of view. In addition, he subtly helps the reader disentangle his and Katie’s voices through syntax. For one thing, the quoted sentence is much more wordy and overblown in quality than the others belonging to the narrator. It incarnates the word-of-mouth rumour mill that defines the community sense of who is good and who is to be condemned, and is characteristic of gossiping Katie. Secondly, the narrator tends to resort to the relative pronoun “who”, whereas Katie resorts to “that”. The relative clauses should therefore be attributed to the narrator. They ironically comment on the community’s and on Katie’s judgemental preacher-like attitude towards those women who do not conform to what they call Christian decency. Because the narrator does not support such moral values and disagrees with Katie’s judgement of Beccka, he expresses his distance by distinguishing his and Katie’s voice. He completely dissociates himself from Katie when the latter ceases to be, or to pretend she is, the voice of the community developing through village gossip, and becomes again the true specialist in un-conforming women’s overt debasement. He subsequently quotes Katie’s own words as the latter tries to instil doubt in Aunty Mary about who Beccka’s father is by implying that Cherry might have been possessed by a duppy of the worst kind:

“But see here Miss Mary you no think Cherry buck up the devil own self when she carrying her? Plenty time that happen you know. Remember that woman over Allside that born the pickney with two head praise Jesus it did born dead. […] And Miss Mary I telling you the living truth, just as the baby borning the midwife no see a shadow fly out of the mother and go right cross the room. She frighten so till she close her two eye tight and is so the devil escape.”

This example shows how sophisticated Olive Senior’s writing of orality is, particularly in third-person narratives when the language of the third-person narrator is directly related to that of the characters, but not only in those. Olive Senior varies her approaches so that they aptly illustrate how community judgements are formed through oral speech. In “Country of the One-Eye God”, the narrator speaks Standard English whereas the characters speak Jamaican Creole. The narrator does not mediate the characters’ speech in order to leave an opportunity for conventions and styles belonging to oral exchanges –for example, the habit to state genealogical references– to be disclosed in such a way as they seem to inscribe themselves in the written text, rather than to be inscribed in it.

Orality may even form part of the story motif as in “The Tenantry of Birds” where it implicitly shows light on Nolene’s identity crisis. Nolene comes from a well-off family. Her background was marked by white Anglo-Saxon cultural values, which were the only ones admitted within her urban family sphere. For all that, she felt strongly attracted to deep Jamaican culture every time she had an opportunity to stay with her
relatives in the country. The following skipping rhyme comes to her mind at the beginning of the story:

Room for rent
Apply within
When I run out
You run in.

It comments on her personal situation as an abandoned wife. It's no accident that she recalls the incantation-like words (“Green Bush. Green Bush. Green Bush”) pronounced by her cousins to keep wasps away. These words used to startle her because they showed how much in control her cousins were, and she so little. She felt as powerless then as she now does. It's no accident either that she recalls the ring games “Brown girl in the ring”, “Jane and Louisa”, and “Bull inna pen” they used to sing and play. The girls' games, which lay the emphasis on un-inhibition, serve as a reminder that so far she has not given vent to her own personality and style. The boys' game, in which she was always trampled on, points to her past errors, and shows the path to strength and empowerment. The message in the story could be that orality is part of the nation’s fabric as well as of the individual's fabric and identity.

Again, in Olive Senior's short stories there is no contrast between the spoken word and the written text. There is on the contrary what might be termed some sort of complicity between the two as in “Confirmation Day”. The popular song “Colón Man” which the children in the story wittingly start singing, participates in the ironical tone of the passage as it implicitly comments on the bishop's driver's bombastic attitude: this song was inspired by the demeanour of the Jamaican men who went to Colón to participate in the construction of the Panama canal, and who came back to Jamaica with a flashy style; as the song shows, they were viewed with ambivalent feelings which the reader is invited to share.

In Olive Senior's short stories, the spoken and the written word undeniably play complementary roles and because of this they are cleverly woven to achieve the narrator's desired effect. As if to convince the reader of how complementary they are, the narrator of “Discerner of Hearts” penetrates into Cissy's thoughts to release the part of the duppy story not covered by the written press, and then expresses them in her own words:

Cissy was convinced now that Theresa couldn't have made that up, because she had known Father to use exactly that kind of recipe to drive out a troublesome duppy that was causing rockstone to fall on a house and pots to go flying off the fire and dishes to smash into the wall and the people inside to run for their lives. Father was particularly proud of that case for it was a celebrated one. It had even been written up in the Gleaner, and many learned men from the university had gone down to the house where this was happening to see what they could do. But nobody could do anything, the duppy even chased out the university men, flung stones at their car, caused one to drop his briefcase and another to lose a sandal as they rushed to get away. Nobody could do anything until Father Burnham was called in, but there was nothing in the Gleaner about that, for this thing had gone on too long and people had lost interest.

Cissy, a Khumina worshipper, knows the whole story because it has been transmitted to her orally by Father Burnham. By bringing the whole story to the fore, the narrator supplies a piece of information that would otherwise have remained ignored by the press. He thus draws indirectly on orality to subtly correct the insufficiencies of the print world submitted to official culture, and to pass on subterranean culture. In
addition, he points to a major difference between written knowledge and oral knowledge. The former risks being discontinued due to the balance which must be kept between the need to globally satisfy the reader's aroused sense of curiosity and the need to yield to his globally volatile attitude. The latter is more continuous as it is imparted thanks to a sustained intimate complicity between the teller and his audience. In view of this, the oral form of story telling chosen by most of the narrators in Olive Senior's short stories might also be analysed as an act affirming the aesthetic role orality has to play in short fiction by keeping the reader enlivened, notably through humour and artistry. Oral culture contains elements, such as **riddles** and **lying stories**, which are destined to provoke sheer enjoyment. When infused in a written text whose goal it is to undermine values and/or behaviours, they add to its comic atmosphere. “Do Angels Wear Brassieres?” is a relevant instance because it shows how much written culture and oral culture wonderfully combine with one another.

When the archdeacon invites Beccka to ask him questions about the Bible, she seizes the opportunity as one to speak in riddles. She tricks the archdeacon who cannot find any suitable answers because he is not prepared to make the unexpected associations Beccka has in mind due to her excellent knowledge of the Bible. While he sticks to the written words of the text, she is able to stretch their meanings to extremes by crossing barriers between the concrete and the abstract. For instance, when she pretends that she wants to know “Who is the shortest man in the Bible?” she is anticipating the delight of supplying him with the ready-made answer, “Peter. Because him sleep on his watch. Ha Ha Ha.” Beccka is versed both in texts which do not originate in Jamaican culture, and in texts belonging to it. Telling **lying stories**, a favourite kind of artfully construed story in Jamaica, bears no secret to her as shown by the great artistry she displays in phrasing the invented piece about her performing in a circus: “in spangles and tights lipstick and powder (her own) Beccka perform every night before a cheering crowd in a blaze of light.” The rhythm of Beccka’s sentence needs not be marked by commas because of the echoes in her carefully chosen consonants (sibilant, plosive, dental), and also because of the assonances (“tights ; night ; light”) at regular intervals. The narrator’s craft at threading the oral text into the written text operates unobstrusively, yet wonderfully.

In the stories where the narrator openly unthreads the two fabrics in an attempt to assess the merits of orality, the reader is nonetheless caught unawares in a network of interacting textual systems. The yet unpublished short story “Mad Fish” is a case in point. It is composed of four parts. The first part and the last two parts belong to the first person narrator. They frame the story proper reproduced by the narrator mainly as it was originally told by Radio to her husband and herself. In the first part, the narrator recalls the day when Radio burst into the family dining-room with that story. She intersperses her account with observations on all the changes Radio’s narration brought—how his speech defect miraculously disappeared so that he was not robbed of the novelty to tell, and how the community began its search for a new system of meaning. These observations form an implicit discourse on the subaltern’s control over the text as the narrator makes plain in the fourth and last part of her narrative when she remarks that Radio has now got “voice and attitude.” She ends the first part with explicit metafictional considerations on Radio’s text and lays out the linguistic and aesthetic basis on which she has chosen to present it to the reader. She takes great pain to inform him that she has contaminated Radio’s text up to a point, and she invites him to embark on a critical reading, which, she announces, will be engagingly provocative.
Yet there is more to it than it seems, and the narrator’s discourse should be read as an implicit postcolonial discourse in which she decolonises the indigenous text. First, the sections narrated in the first person point to the separate autonomous existence of Radio’s oral narrative. Secondly, in keeping with that acknowledged independence, the narrator steps down to leave Radio entire responsibility for poetic diction, and to take linguistic co-responsibility only by supplementing the latter’s text with whatever explanations she thinks fit to suit the non-Jamaican reader’s needs. To this end, she abandons her Queen’s English rich in words of Latin origin for, as she says, “a closer approximation of the English language.”

She thus lays bare the foundations of a text that places the spoken word at the centre and the written word at the margin. Thirdly, she establishes a direct speech dialogue with the non-Jamaican reader in which she challenges him to appropriate the story she has written for him, and to transform it as he pleases in order to create his own mode of perceiving the reality of the Caribbean world. By so doing, she implicitly de-sanctifies the written text as the finished private object of the writer, and she re-positions it as an unstable object in the hands of an independent recipient capable of teasing out original meanings.

The dialogic dimension of the text which “Mad Fish” delineates is also emphasized by Lenora, the young female narrator of “Ballad”. Her text is the result of her rebellion against the monological reception it was given by her teacher whose duty it is to instil the Anglo-Saxon cultural values. Because she had chosen Rilla –a disreputable woman from the community– as a character for her composition instead of a character in the English books on the curriculum, her paper was torn up. In view of this, she decided to write/tell another story for readers with whom she shared cultural values as she implies by addressing them via the inclusive pronoun “we”. Among these cultural values she places Jamaican English and the oral style, and she channels the latter into the written text while recounting the traumatic process of being confronted to a world fissured by communication and behavioural code chasms. Her childhood was fraught with tensions about her mixed roots and her options for development were presented to her as tied to race and language. Her situation was one in which she was marginalized in her family home because she was the least fair one and a stepdaughter. In her everyday life she was exposed to the oral tradition where a demand for full comprehension of Patwa was made, but she had to speak Standard English at school. She thus had to confront the subdued, refined voice expected of her as someone committed to acceptable language and behaviour, to the loud outbursts associated with vulgarity, and she was required to reject Patwa as unfit for written communication. Between the two poles she meandered awkwardly, but Rilla inspired her. She was fascinated by Rilla’s physical vitality which completely contrasted with the intellectual development offered to her. In addition, at Rilla’s home she was central, not peripheral, and there she found solace, could heal her wounds, and find appropriate advice in order to grow harmoniously without sacrificing anything of her identity. So when Rilla died, she found herself an orphan and decided to write/tell a ballad in Rilla’s memory so that she could continue the process of re-membering. Intersecting the codes of scribal discourse with the codes of orality is her way of exploring the possibilities of reconciling the options she has been left with.

For all this, transgressing the canon proves quite challenging. When she admits, “Now it look like I gone and spoil this ballad story for this is not the way I want to tell it at all. The part about Miss Rilla dying is the end part and it really should start at the beginning”24, she implicitly hints at a feeling of guilt due to the fact that she has lost

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rational control over the linearity of her text and that, wrought out by Rilla’s death, she has let the story unfold in loops and swoops, and repeat her own sense of loss and desolation. Unconsciously, she has structured her text according to the traditional oral features of eulogy, and also of delaying climax because only at the very end of her ballad does she reveal the culminating point in the upheavals of Rilla’s life, namely her responsibility in the murder of Jiveman, her official lover, by Bigger, her lover on the side. Having crossed the boundaries between written composition as a fixed system of values, and oral story telling practices characterized by mutability, she nonetheless remains unsure of the validity of her counter-discursive approach to the world which requires that her ballad be read through texts which differ from the canonized ones. She is in the position of the budding Caribbean writer facing the possibilities, but also the conflicts, inherent in creative writing.

In her fiction, Olive Senior manages to wonderfully integrate the varieties of influences to which Caribbean people have been exposed and she strikes a complicated note of her own in the intricate geometry of two modes of story-telling. The spoken word does not contrast with the written word; on the contrary, it is part and parcel of the fabric of the written text where it serves the purpose of introducing a counter-discourse to balance the authorized discourse. The knot that Olive Senior thus ties with the written and the spoken word mirrors the cross-cultural element in the Caribbean space and contributes to its reflection in the world outside it.

NOTES

1. If not otherwise specified, the pronoun “he” shall be used to mean “the narrator”.
5. “Ascot”, Summer Lightning and Other Stories, p. 28.
6. Rolling Calf appears as a calf with red fiery eyes and clanking chains. It both rolls and roars, and is regarded as a “restless spirit” and is believed to be the duppy of people who lived dishonest lives. (Dictionary of Caribbean Usage, Richard Allsop, Ed. Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 52)
7. Ascot”, Summer Lightning and Other Stories, p. 31.
9. The Christian name sounds ironical insofar as it carries kinship to Dorcas, the Christian woman of Joppa celebrated in the early church for her good works, and who was resuscitated by Peter.
10. “Do Angels Wear Brassieres ?”, Summer Lightning and Other Stories, p. 68.
11. Duppy stories are part of Jamaican folklore. “The ‘duppy’ is believed to be the spirit of someone who was wicked in life or who was not accorded proper memorials or who has unfinished business on earth and so has stayed around to haunt the living,” (Encyclopaedia of Jamaican Heritage, p.164.) In Katie’s story, the signs of a duppy story are the following: (i) it happened near a river (ii) the “shadow” echoes the “shadow” side of the human personality that
spirits are said to represent, and the woman’s “two-headed” baby attests that she was possessed as one can tell a duppy is near by a feeling of the head “growing big” (iii) the word “buck” echoes the well known expression “Bull buck and duppy conquerer”, which describes the worst spirit.

12. “Do Angels Wear Brassieres ?”, Summer Lightning and Other Stories, p. 68.
14. Ibid., p. 49.
16. The song goes:
   One two three four
   Colon man a come
   With him a watch chain
   A lick him belly
   Bam Bam Bam
   Ask him for the time
   And he look upon the sun

18. “Kumina is based on the Central African belief in each person possessing a dual soul: the personal spirit [...] and the individual’s shadow. [...] During ceremonies, the spirits are summoned by songs and drumbeats to enter and possess the Kumina dancers. [...] To summon the spirits for assistance is the purpose of a Kumina ceremony.” (Encyclopaedia of Jamaican Heritage, p. 271).
19. Summer Lightning and Other Stories.
21. Ibid., p. 76.
23. Ibid., p. 4.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article a pour objet l’étude des différentes techniques utilisées par Olive Senior (auteur jamaïcain qui s’inspire de la vie quotidienne sur son île natale) pour imprégner ses nouvelles de la langue orale jamaïcaine. Nous tenterons, en particulier, de mettre en évidence le jeu très étroit que l’auteur établit entre écriture et oralité en nous attardant sur le choix des narrateurs qui, en tant que membres de la communauté rurale jamaïcaine ou ayant eu des contacts étroits avec celle-ci, véhiculent naturellement la tradition orale et les habitudes culturelles héritées du passé. Nous montrerons aussi que l’impression générale qui se dégage à la lecture des nouvelles est celle d’une belle complémentarité entre deux façons différentes de raconter des histoires.

AUTHORS

MARIE-ANNICK MONTOUT

Marie-Annick Montout is a senior lecturer at the University of Angers where she mostly teaches translation. She has passed the Agrégation competition and she has written her thesis on Olive
Senior’s collections of short stories. She specializes in Caribbean literature in general, and in English Caribbean literature in particular, with an interest in translation strategies for Caribbean texts.
Orality and the Reader: Cultural and Transcultural Elements in Achebe’s Girls at War

Timothy Weiss

1 For those of us who teach English to second-language or foreign-language learners, one of the most important decisions we make in planning courses in literary studies is the choice of texts. We are often constrained by the course description or text availability, but even if we are not there are other practical constraints that affect our choices and one of the most basic is whether or not a text is readable. What this term means varies from one learner environment to another and from one group of students to another even within the same learner environment; differences granted though, orality would seem to be a feature of readable texts: whether or not a text has a conversational, speech-like quality would seem to be one element that determines how second-language learners—or the second-language learners whom I teach—will respond to it. A text that has a conversational, speech-like quality would seem to be easier for these students to read than other more writerly texts: that, at least, was the assumption with which I began this study of textual orality.

2 The topic of orality is obviously one on which empirical research can be and should be done. I agree with comparative literature scholars Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, who in Knowledge and Commitment: A Problem-Oriented Approach to Literary Studies argue that literary studies involve both interpretation and empirical research; the two go hand in hand. As a step in this direction, I surveyed Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) students about their experiences of reading short stories by Chinua Achebe, and I will refer to the results of two surveys later in the essay. I would also like to indicate in this introduction what I mean by orality and what my theoretical orientations are. The most basic definition of “orality” denotes that quality which has to do with speech and conversation, and this is the definition that I will stick to in this essay. Nevertheless, due to the influence of scholars from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward who have studied folktales and folk traditions, orality has a more specialized meaning that links it with storytelling in primitive cultures (i.e.,
cultures without writing) and with popular folk traditions (Lévi-Strauss 15). A West African writer like Achebe, who incorporates folktales, legends, proverbs, and popular wisdom, simulates this latter kind of orality in his fiction. Still, it is this initial definition of orality as approximated speech or conversation that I will principally consider in this essay. “The basic orality of language is permanent,” Walter Ong contends (7). Perhaps an overused term of Mikhail Bakhtin gets even closer to the meaning of orality that I have in mind. Language has a “dialogic” quality; it engages dialogue and emerges from dialogue. Paul Ricoeur’s definition of text also develops this notion of writing simulating dialogue or conversation: a text, he argues, involves somebody saying something about something to someone (Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?”).

In Jean-Paul Sartre’s well-known essay, “Qu’est-ce que la littérature,” the literary object is called a “peculiar top that exists only in movement” (“une étrange toupie, qui n’existe qu’en mouvement”) (“What Is Literature?” 1337); reading is necessary to give it a spin. For Sartre, reading is “directed creation” (“création dirigée”) (1339). Paul Ricoeur’s essays on the nature of texts build on this and other ideas that underscore the contribution of readers in the making of meaning (“Le structure, le mot, l’événement”). Ricoeur calls writing “interrupted speech.” Whereas speech as discourse is anchored in a circumstantial reality, this is not the case with written discourse, such as a literary text, which “suspends” the circumstantial referentiality of speech. Because texts “suspend” or “defer” circumstantial reference, their relation to the world differs from that of speech. In the act of speech or discourse, words tend to subordinate themselves to the things to which they refer in a circumstantial situation, while in literary texts words “cease to efface themselves in front of things; written words become words for themselves” (“What Is a Text?” 47). The text’s “eclipse” of the circumstantial situation invites the reader “to fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication”; this entails acts of comprehension and interpretation. Emphasizing the relationship with speech inherent in the act of reading, Ricoeur contends that the aim of reading is to “complete the text in present speech”; to read is “to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text” (“What Is a Text?” 56-57).

Reader-oriented theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish further develop the notion of the reader’s contribution to a text, with the latter theorist viewing that contribution as almost total. Reader-oriented theory intersects with translation theory, which emphasizes that any reading and interpretation of a text involves a translation of the strange into the familiar; linguistic and cultural conventions are some commonly translated elements (Steiner, Iser). From a translational perspective, reading involves a deverbalization of the text; interpretation involves the further step of re-verbalization or expression (Weiss “Interpretation as Translation”). In the process of reading, the reader builds and projects images and themes; in order to do this he/she must bring a context to the text. Meaning thus emerges in a continually shifting movement of foregrounded and backgrounded segments that draw on the reader’s repertoire, or stockpiles of historical, literary, and sociocultural information. Umberto Eco, among others, refers to this repertoire as the reader’s “encyclopedic knowledge.” All in all, the aesthetic object that emerges in the act of reading and interpretation inevitably taps into belief systems, history, culture and society, and this is the larger background against which the textual figure stands out and takes its meaning. Re-verbalization or interpreted re-expression of the text draws consciously on the reader’s overall cognitive knowledge, stored primarily in long-term memory.
My research on orality began with the hypothesis that prose with oral features facilitates students’ contextualization of a text and therefore allows them to read it with less difficulty and more confidence. What became clear to me, though, when I looked more carefully at passages from Achebe’s stories and at students’ responses to survey questions about them, was that many elements figure into comprehension and only some of them can be linked to orality. Furthermore, orality in itself does not equate with comprehension. Hong Kong students find Mark Twain’s fiction (with its American dialects) difficult to understand; the lyrics of rap music are often based on popular language and speech, yet for someone on the outside of the language group, the lyrics may have little meaning. Linguistic conventions as well as sociocultural knowledge are two areas of overall cognitive knowledge that would seem to impact on readability and comprehension.

Hong Kong Student Responses to Achebe’s Fiction

Chinua Achebe’s collection of short stories, Girls at War (1972) may be less well known than his novels Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, or Arrow of God, yet the collection shows the same gift for storytelling and original use of language. I have taught stories from this collection several times in introductory courses for first-year students, such as Writing about Language and Literature and World Literatures in English, and although I have often made reference to proverbs, West African sayings, and the folktale tradition in Achebe, I have never gone beyond that to attempt to pin down the specifics of the oral quality of this fiction. In the first survey I took a very basic approach, asking my students some simple questions about their responses to two stories, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” and “The Sacrificial Egg.” These stories are neither the easiest nor the most difficult to read in the collection; they fall somewhere in between, and both are quite short, only six pages each. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” uses a first-person narrative in which a character, Ben, reminisces about his life in an anecdotal way; the incidents that the story recounts occur in 1919 in colonial Nigeria when Ben, still a bachelor, worked as a young clerk in the Niger Company. Unlike the collection’s title story, “Girls at War,” an anti-war story, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is seemingly not about anything at all; rather, it is about a certain West African style of talking and living, and is full of humor, irony, and West African sayings and turns of expression. Here is a typical example of Ben’s style of storytelling and his West African mannerisms:

My father told me that a true son of our land must know how to sleep and keep one eye open. I never forget it. So I played and laughed with everyone and they shouted “Jolly Ben! Jolly Ben!” but I knew what I was doing. The women of Umuru are very sharp; before you count A they count B. So I had to be very careful. I never showed any of them the road to my house and never ate the food they cooked for fear of love medicines. I had seen many young men kill themselves with women in those days, so I remembered my father’s word: Never let a handshake pass the elbow.

Although the story does contain a principal incident, which occurs in the final pages, Ben’s personality and manner of storytelling are its real focus.

The second story, “The Sacrificial Egg,” is recounted by an omniscient third-person narrator; its subject matter is cultural collisions and their psychological effects on the central character, Julius Obi. The story includes references to and descriptions of West
African legend, religion and rituals. Here is a representative paragraph of the content and texture of this story:

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the River Niger. This market, though still called Nkwo, had long spilled over into Eke, Oye, and Afo with the coming of civilization and the growth of the town into the big palm-oil port. In spite of this encroachment, however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity who had presided over it from antiquity still cast her spell only on her own day—let men in their greed spill over themselves. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the centre of the market just before cock-crow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth—in front of her, behind her, to the right and to the left—to draw the market men and women from distant places. And they came bringing the produce of their lands—palm-oil and kernels, cola nuts, cassava, mats, baskets and earthenware pots; and took home many-coloured cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates. (43-44)

In the story’s culminating incident, Julius mistakenly steps on an egg, left in the middle of a footpath as an offering to African spirits; his psychological torment becomes the focus of the final paragraphs, which show him torn between traditional and Western ways of thinking and acting.

In the first survey I asked two groups of students (74 total), all of whom speak Cantonese or Mandarin as a first language, six questions about these stories and their experience of reading them:

1. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is easier to read than “The Sacrificial Egg.” Yes or no.
2. It is easier to imagine the character Uncle Ben than the character Julius Obi. Yes or no.
3. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is more dramatic than “The Sacrificial Egg.” Yes or no.
4. Uncle Ben is a better talker than Julius Obi. Yes or no.
5. Briefly list five things that Uncle Ben says or does.
6. Briefly list five things that Julius Obi says or does.

My goal was to determine whether CUHK students, whose mother tongue is not English, perceive orality in these African short stories, and if they do, whether this orality facilitates reading and reading comprehension. I also wondered whether the details of stories with a significant orality would be easier for students to remember. Here is a summary of the results:

First Survey

Questions 1-4

<table>
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<th>Question</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
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<th>Neutral</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>
Typical elements that students remembered about “Uncle Ben’s Choice”:

- Uncle Ben found a naked woman in his bed.
- Uncle Ben met Mami Wota and refused her.
- Uncle Ben likes drinking but he never mixes his drinks or drinks with women.
- Uncle Ben respected his father’s advice a lot.
- Uncle Ben never got drunk.
- Uncle Ben quit smoking.
- Uncle Ben chose family over wealth.
- He joined the African club.
- He met a girl called Margaret.
- He did not regret his choice (i.e., not to stay with the naked woman)

Typical elements that students remembered about “The Sacrificial Egg”:

- Julius stepped on an egg and broke it.
- Julius is a clerk.
- Julius studied in a missionary school when he was a child.
- The market, at the end of the story, is very quiet.
- Julius blamed himself for causing the illness of his mother and girlfriend.
- His mother and girlfriend were “decorated” with small pox.
- Julius worked in a Western company and received a Western education.
- Julius used to look out to the market by the river through his office windows.

Analysis and Interpretation

Sixty-two percent of the students did in fact find “Uncle Ben’s Choice” an easier story to read; sixty-four percent also found the character of Uncle Ben easier to imagine than Julius Obi. These percentages are less, though, than I had expected, for in my view, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is clearly more conversationally oral than “The Sacrificial Egg.” In response to question Number 3, fifty-four percent of the students found “Uncle Ben’s Choice” slightly more dramatic than “The Sacrificial Egg”; the final pages of both stories are in fact quite dramatic. In response to Question 4, students did show that they perceive the difference between a first-person narrator like Uncle Ben and the third-person narrator of “The Sacrificial Egg.” For eighty-four percent of the students Ben is the better talker. In response to Questions 5 and 6, students seemed to remember details from both stories about equally.

Results of the first survey suggest that students do perceive textual orality; however, its effects on the reading process are difficult to generalize for at least some of the following reasons. First, it is important to remember that any textual orality implies a translation from one medium to another; as Ode Ogede observes in an article entitled “Oral Echoes in Armah’s Short Stories,” Armah attempts to create the “illusion of an oral performance” (76). With translation theory in mind, we could say that Ogede tries to determine how Armah translates or creates the semblance of orality in his short stories, and I believe that this is a fruitful approach to take with Achebe as well. Secondly, orality is a block term; there are certainly different kinds of orality, and not all of them, when translated into writing, will necessarily facilitate reading. Orality in fiction is often broadly linked with the folktale tradition; this tradition, however, may
have little to do with the conversational qualities of a language in the twenty-first century, nor may there be an easy way to translate into fictional form an oral event as it is imagined by today’s readers. Thirdly, cultural differences likely affect orality. “The basic orality of language is permanent,” Walter Ong has argued (7), yet it would seem likely that orality also differs in some respects from one language and one culture to the next. Perhaps the problem with orality as a term is its implied universality, which masks the differences that occur across languages and cultures. There seem to be both cultural and transcultural elements of orality; there also seem to be some universal elements.

To make sense of a story, readers depend on various kinds of knowledge of subject matter, culture and society, and conventions of conversation and storytelling. A closer look at “Uncle Ben’s Choice” reveals why Westernized Chinese students in Hong Kong have difficulty reading it; the following are some of the elements that make for problems:

- Narrative indirection: Ben’s manner of talking and telling the story is puzzling; to some Hong Kong students it is not clear what Ben is getting at or why he is telling the story.
- The story’s unusual subject matter and the narrator’s idiosyncratic selection of incidents and details reported on: the topics that Ben talks about (e.g., drinking bouts and being in bed with a naked woman) are not normal topics of conversation in Asian cultures, so Asian readers wonder why Ben selects these incidents for his autobiographical portrait.
- Localized references: Ben’s use of West African proverbs and metaphors must be translated into a context that makes them understandable for Hong Kong readers.
- Doubts about the narrator’s reliability: Ben’s mixture of the probable and the improbable, or to put this in another way, his mixture of the plausible, the intentionally exaggerated, and the implausible, can be confusing.

Ben begins his tale in the middle of things:

In the year nineteen hundred and nineteen I was a young clerk in the Niger Company at Umuru. To be a clerk in those days is like to be a minister today. My salary was two pounds then. You may laugh but two pounds ten in those days is like fifty pounds today. You could buy a big goat with four shillings. . . .

Like all progressive young men I joined the African Club. We played tennis and billiards. Every year we played a tournament with the European Club. But I was less concerned with that. What I liked was the Saturday night dances. Women were surplus. Not all the waw-waw women you see in townships today but beautiful things like this.

I had a Raleigh bicycle, brand new, and everybody called me Jolly Ben. I was selling like hotcakes. (75)

There are many questions that will pop up in students’ minds about this passage. For example, why does Ben begin telling his story at this particular point in his life? In what way was being a clerk in those days the same as being a minister today? When is “today”? Why does Ben talk about his salary in terms of goats? What was the difference between the African Club and the European Club? What are “waw-waw women”? Why does Ben talk about owning a bicycle? Why does he compare himself to “hotcakes”? Who are Ben’s listeners, and what is his relationship with them? What is the point of the story he is telling? To understand this passage, a student needs, among other things, a context, a certain base of cultural, social knowledge, and knowledge of styles of conversational English. I’m not sure that a student can hear Ben’s voice, so to speak, without this kind of information.
I want to elaborate on one particular difficulty that readers face: assessing Ben’s reliability as narrator. Although readers assume this reliability at the beginning, what becomes clear at least to some readers two or three paragraphs into the narrative is that Ben may be exaggerating the details of his past; he may even be inventing the details. At the end of the story, which includes an incident that Ben either exaggerates or makes up, the narrator’s motive as a storyteller can be seen in a different light: perhaps he has told this story to explain, in a roundabout way, that there are more important things in life than making money, or perhaps his storytelling has been a strategy to raise his esteem in the eyes of his cronies and younger wives—telling them that he had opportunities to get on in the world, but he turned them down:

Today whenever my wives make me vex I tell them: “I don’t blame you. If I had been wise I would have taken Mami Wota.” They laugh and ask me why did I not take her. The youngest one says: “Don’t worry, Papa, she will come again; she will come tomorrow.” And they laugh again. (80)

In this passage, Mami Wota refers both to a character in a West African legend and to the culminating incident in Ben’s narrative: that is, after drinking late on New Year’s Eve he goes home to find a naked woman in his bed, and in the darkness, he never discovers with certainty the identity of this woman although he chooses to leave her. The end of the short story puzzles more than a few students, partly because Ben makes his point indirectly by mixing legend with rhetorical embellishment; his relationship to his listeners remains unclear. And here we see a fundamental difference between the oral and the written: in a conversation, the status of the speaker and his/her relationship to the listener is often crucial to the interpretation of the words exchanged. I would argue that this is even more the case in Asian cultures, where respect for authority is stronger than it is in the West. The effectiveness of Achebe’s story seems to depend to a certain degree on the reader’s knowledge of a West African style of conversation and storytelling; it also depends on the reader’s ability to fill in a context that will make the narration understandable. Achebe’s simulation of the oral event of Uncle Ben’s telling his life story seeks to create an aesthetic effect that is perhaps more literary than oral in nature. Or to say this in other words: textual orality is not necessarily simpler, less aesthetic, and more easily comprehensible than other, more writerly textuality.

A Second Survey and Final Remarks

In the title of this essay I have used the terms “cultural and transcultural elements,” yet I myself wonder whether one can be differentiated from the other. Achebe has said that good stories cross cultural barriers to become universal (Jayalakshmi). He must be right, and it is certainly the crossing of cultural barriers that is the tricky part. Achebe’s stories are unquestionably African in certain respects, yet their ideas and effects can often be translated (I am using the word in a broad sense) and explained in terms of other cultures, such as Hong Kong and Chinese cultures. I would put in this category of translatable elements some of the sayings and proverbs that pervade the short-story collection. These elements seem more about human attitudes and behavior than about something particular to one culture. Other elements that seem to me harder to translate are those that involve actions that would be interpreted differently in Hong Kong and Chinese cultures; for example, the taking of Nwibe’s clothes in “The Madman,” the carrying of the sister into the bush to die in “Akueke,” the night masque
in “The Sacrificial Egg,” and Uncle Ben’s behavior vis-à-vis the naked woman in the eponymous story. Translating such actions depends not only on students’ understanding of human behavior but also on their knowledge of cultures different from their own. Along these same lines, I believe orality does not escape this necessity of translation. As Walter Ong assumes and as Achebe himself suggests, orality embodies certain universal elements; it seems equally clear, though, that many oral elements depend on translation from one culture to another in order to be understood.

To consider this issue a bit further, in a second survey I asked CUHK students to rank, according to difficulty of understanding, twelve short passages culled from the twelve stories of Girls at War. Here is the list of passages and the average ranking for each item.

**Second Survey**

Directions: For each entry below, indicate whether the passage is readily understandable, moderately understandable, difficult to understand, or extremely difficult to understand. Use a scale of 1 to 10 to rank your response; for example: 1 = easily understandable; 5 = moderately understandable; 7 = quite difficult to understand; 10 = extremely difficult to understand.

[There were 40 respondents; the average score for each item appears after the item number.]

1. 6.7 “They want to kill your dog, but our people say the man who decides to chase after a chicken, for him is the fall . . . .”
2. 3.2 “We did not ask for money yesterday; we shall not ask him tomorrow. But today is our day; we have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need.”
3. 2.6 “We are God’s chickens. Sometimes He chooses a young chicken to eat and sometimes He chooses an old one.”
4. 5.4 “Your son has joined the white man’s religion. And you too in your old age when you should know better. And do you wonder that he is stricken with insanity? Those who gather ant-infested faggots must be prepared for the visit of lizards.”
5. 4.3 Progress had turned [the town] into a busy, sprawling, crowded and dirty river port, a no-man’s land where strangers outnumbered by far the sons of the soil . . . . For indeed they had prayed—who will blame them—for their town to grow and prosper. And it had grown. But there is good growth and there is bad growth. The belly does not bulge out only with food and drink; it might be the abominable disease which would end by sending its sufferer out of the house even before he was fully dead.
6. 2.8 “And that thing that calls himself a man talks to me about the craze for education. All his children go to school, even the one that is only two years; but that is no craze. Rich people have no craze. It is only when the children of poor widows like me want to go with the rest that it becomes a craze.”
7. 4.9 “Let the hawk perch, and let the eagle perch.”
8. 2.6 “My father told me that a true son of our land must know how to sleep and keep one eye open. I never forget it.”
9. 3.8 “I had seen many young men kill themselves with women in those days, so I remembered my father’s words: ‘Never let a handshake pass the elbow.’”
10. 6 “Arighto. Now make we talk business. We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. Not be so?”

11. 6.2 “May bullet crack sugar’s head!”

12. 6.1 “That time done pass. Now everybody want survival. They call it number six. You put your number six; I put my number six. Everything all right.”

I will attempt to differentiate transcultural versus cultural elements by contrasting the four most difficult passages, in the students’ eyes at least, with the three easiest. To my surprise, No. 1 was considered the most difficult; apparently, this difficulty has nothing to do with chickens since No. 3, which also mentions chickens, was deemed the easiest of the twelve passages to understand. No. 1 does have a slight, culturally specific component, but its difficulty seems to have more to do with the lack of apparent logical connection between preventing someone from killing a dog, chasing after a chicken, and falling down. No. 11 is difficult because it lacks a context to make it understandable; even within the story though, its comprehensibility depends on students’ making a connection between war and an individual’s struggle to break a “habit,” that is, adding sugar to one’s tea. No. 12 also depends on a context, but less so, I believe, than No. 11; No. 12 features some West African English as well as a not immediately apparent connection between the sounds of the word “survival” and “six.” No. 10 features West African English; some students have difficulty understanding the ideas chiefly for this reason, but there are also some conceptual difficulties (i.e., a contrast between civil peace and civil war) that students need to deal with in order to understand the passage. In contrast, students found Nos. 3, 8, and 6 the least difficult to understand. It could be argued that all three of these contain a strong transcultural element. For example, No. 3 seems to depend on the concept of God or a god as omnipotent and human beings as relatively powerless in comparison. No. 8, although it involves paradox, takes on meaning in reference to a universal phenomenon: sleep. Students do not seem to have difficulty understanding the metaphor of sleeping with one eye open: in other words, never to let down one’s guard completely. No. 6 features some elements of West African English, yet these do not seem to prevent most students from understanding the basic transcultural idea of inequality between the rich and the poor. So it does seem that passages that depend on transcultural elements, and on universal phenomena, are easier for students to comprehend.

The preliminary research that I have carried out suggests that orality, or the reader’s sense of a person speaking, is recognizable even to EFL and ESL readers, for all cultures have conventions of dialogue and conversation. The problem, though, is that these conventions differ from one culture to another, as do styles of storytelling; furthermore, because speech also involves “someone saying something about something to someone,” the problem of a reader’s insufficient knowledge of a subject matter and of a circumstantial milieu also must be taken into consideration. Lastly, it is clear that textual orality can be quite complex and richly aesthetic in its effects. Thus, the “literariness” of some kinds of textualized orality must be recognized; in addition, the silent or less tangible aspects of orality must be brought to perception and then translated by readers in order for the stories to cross the cultural barrier.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


ABSTRACTS

Cette communication examine l’oralité textuelle dans deux nouvelles de Chinua Achebe, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” et “The Sacrificial Egg,” tiré de son recueil, Girls at War (1972); en plus, elle analyse les résultats de deux sondages qui mesurent la compréhension de ces textes par des étudiants du département d’anglais à l’université chinoise de Hong Kong. Les résultats du premier sondage indiquent que les étudiants remarquent bien les éléments d’oralité dans ces nouvelles; néanmoins, il est difficile de faire des généralisations concernant l’impact de l’oralité sur le processus de lire. Les résultats du deuxième sondage suggèrent que les éléments culturels et transculturels jouent aussi un rôle dans la compréhension des textes qui contiennent des éléments d’oralité. L’analyse de ces nouvelles de Achebe et les résultats des sondages montrent que l’oralité textuelle peut prendre des formes compliquées et peut avoir des effets esthétiquement riches.

AUTHORS

TIMOTHY WEISS

Timothy Weiss is a Professor in the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His books include Translating Orients: Between Ideology and Utopia (University of Toronto Press, 2004), English and Globalization: Perspectives from Hong Kong and Mainland China (co-edited with Kwok-kan Tam; Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2004), and On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992). In the USA he has taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Maine. He has been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Liberia, West Africa (1975–77), and a Senior Fulbright Scholar in Tunisia (1988–89) and Algeria and Morocco (1993–94).
Author Interview
An interview with Sandi Russell
Angers 26th November 2005

Laurent Lepaludier

1 Laurent Lepaludier: I would like to make a short presentation of Sandi Russell, for those who weren’t at the concert last night. This time I will focus perhaps more on Sandi Russell’s achievements in fiction.

2 She is a native New Yorker who grew up in Harlem, studied music at Syracuse University, Hunter College, and New York University. She now lives in Durham, in the United Kingdom. She has performed throughout the US and the UK as a professional jazz singer and she has written about it in Glancing Fires: An Investigation into Women’s Creativity (ed. Leslie Saunders, Virago Book, 1987). She has worked with jazz luminaries, such as Lionel Hampton, Roy Eldridge, Ellis Larkin, Beaver Harris, and Jean Toussaint. She has been interviewed on various talk shows in the US as well as for BBC Radio and television. She has performed at the most prestigious clubs in New York and London. She sings classic jazz and blues as well as popular standards. She performed in two shows, ‘The American Songbook and Beyond’, and ‘Render Me My Song’, a one-woman show inspired from a book on African American women writers, from slavery to the present.

3 For Sandi Russell is not only a singer, she is also a critic and a writer. Besides writing Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present (Pandora Press, 1991, updated in 2004), Sandi Russell coedited the Virago Book of Love Poetry in 1990. She has contributed to magazines with essays and interviews, with Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Betty Carter, Rosa Guy, Paul Marshall, Ntozake Shange and Paule Marshall. Sandi Russell’s poetry has been anthologised several times. She has received the Society of Authors’ K.Blundell Trust Award and the Northern Arts Writers’ Award.

4 Our research center was particularly interested in her short-story “Sister”, anthologised in IronWomen, New Stories by Women, edited by Kitty Fitzgerald, and in Daughters of Africa, edited by Margaret Busby, because of its overall quality, and we held a seminar on it. The oral dimension of Sandi Russell’s writing is the reason why we decided to invite her as a guest of honour for this conference on orality in short fiction.
Her scholarly achievements, her ear for music and sounds, and her writing style offer a perfect combination for a topic such as ours. So it is a great pleasure and honour for us to be in Sandi Russell’s company.

Traditionally, and it is a tradition established more than twenty years ago in this research center, we invite short-story writers to read from their works, and answer questions from us and from the floor. We are grateful that Sandi Russell has accepted this tradition, after other writers such as Mavis Gallant, Graham Greene, V.S. Pritchett, Benedict Kiely, Muriel Spark, Antonia Byatt, Amit Chaudhuri, Romesh Gunasekera, Merle Collins, Olive Senior, David Madden, Louis de Bernières, John McGahern, Alistair McLeod, Peter Taylor, Elisabeth Spencer, Grace Paley and Tobias Wolff. The interviews are available in a special issue of our *Journal of the Short-Story in English* (JSSE n° 41-Autumn 2003).

[To Sandi Russell] In fact, rather than reading from “Sister”, you’ve decided to read from *Tidewater*, which is a novel in progress.

Sandi Russell: No, it’s completed.

Laurent Lepaludier: It’s not published yet.

Sandi Russell: No, I’ve literally just completed it.

***

Sandi Russell: I would like to thank Laurent Lepaludier and the entire committee for choosing me for this very, very special honour. The short-story that was chosen, ‘Sister’, is really the kernel of my newly completed novel, *Tidewater*. This novel is a multi-voiced narrative concerning issues of colour and sexuality in the twentieth century. It also explores the Native-American/African-American exchange.

*Tidewater* takes place in an area of Virginia where the Atlantic Ocean meets the fresh waters that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in North America, where Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, married John Rolf in 1614, and the first slaves from Africa landed in 1619. The narrative follows Charlotte, a New York artist, in her quest for her roots in Virginia. As she, and the reader, encounters her relatives across three generations, truths about the place and its history, including 200 years of slavery, and the near obliteration of the original tribe, come to light.

The excerpt that I’m going to read takes place at the funeral wake of Rose, the mother of Franklin, who is married to Charlotte’s mother’s sister, Sadie. Here, she encounters ‘Cousin Sister,’ the character from my short-story now called ‘Cousin Sister’, as opposed to ‘Sister’. After many years of not seeing her, Charlotte also later meets Henrietta, Cousin Sister’s sister. She is supposedly insane, but she is also the linchpin of the novel. Through her crazed vision, we learn of the family history, and of the history of her people. In this section, she remembers the moment that changed her life forever.

***

(Reading of the excerpt)
Interview

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: I’m always very curious about what pushes a person to write, and we’ve been given some insight into your talent as a writer. Can you tell us what brought you to write fiction?

Sandi Russell: That’s a very good question. I’m not really sure. I think music had a lot to do with it, interestingly. I’ve been singing off and on since the age of 4, and singing is a form of story telling. And so, I think that, when I wasn’t literally making musical sounds, I still had some kind of impetus to tell stories. I was a voracious reader, so it just seemed the other thing that I could do, in a sense, was to continue to make music, because I try to write in a musical way.

Laurent Lepaludier: In “Sister” the narrator says she walked along the dirt road and “listened to her heart beat. It danced ahead of her footsteps.” Other sounds are also mentioned: the wailing of a dog, a loud voice, “the throaty sound of a screen door”, Sister’s “incantation rising to a scream”, the moaning of a rocking chair, etc. How important are natural sounds and rhythms in your writing?

Sandi Russell: I think they are very important. Maybe again, it has to do with my musicianship and the fact that my ears are, metaphorically, very large. [laughter] I’m always hearing things and sounds, – even in my head. So yes, it’s very important in my writing that these sounds are evoked.

Laurent Lepaludier: The scene of the peanuts in the Cola in “Sister” also attracted my interest. The narrator says, “We’d open the peanuts and watch them slither into the soda, making a plopping, fizzy sound. There was no explanation for this. It just meant we were different, special somehow.” Is this sound made by the peanuts in the soda related to a particular family or social identity?

Sandi Russell: In fact, it was something that was done in that area, in the South, by a lot of young people. I don’t know why. We thought it was the tastiest, most magnificent thing in the world. [laughter] In retrospect, it really baffles me. [laughter] But I see somebody there recognising the story I tell! And it did, you know the sound was literally ‘plopped’ right into the bottle. And then of course, the fizz of the Cola was accentuated by the salt, I suppose, of the peanut.

Laurent Lepaludier: An old-timey song is quoted in “Sister” (‘Come on Baby, Come on Back Home’, and the hymn ‘Precious Lord Take my Hand’. Can you tell us about the type of music they are and, perhaps, what they suggest to you?

Sandi Russell: The first one is a sort of blues tune that “yours truly” made up. And the blues, is where jazz comes from. I think the blues is always very evocative of African American culture, in its truest sense. So maybe, that’s why I use the blues. And ‘Precious Lord Take my Hand’ is a Gospel hymn that I love and I just used it because it’s one of my favorite songs.

Laurent Lepaludier: It’s contrasted with Country and Western music in the story.

Sandi Russell: Yes, Country and Western music signified (except for Charlie Pride, who was an African American) white American singing. And it’s not true now, but many
years ago, a lot of it was considered to be sung by people that weren’t particularly amorous of African-American people or their culture. So, that’s the juxtaposition there.

Michelle Ryan Sautour: You’ve talked a little bit about music. And, according to your book, and as many people have noted throughout the conference, it’s a trend in African-American fiction. You’ve talked about how Margaret Walker’s experience with poetic forms based on black jazz and blues rhythms and how Gwendolyn Brooks uses the ballad and the Negro spiritual. Could you comment a little bit more on this idea?

Sandi Russell: Music is very important to Black Americans for many reasons. Not only because it is a lovely, relaxing thing, but because it holds a great deal of political significance and significance for survival, historically. In slavery days, slave chants and what we now call “Negro spirituals” were used not only to help ease the burden of the difficult work that slaves had to do but also to send coded messages to each other to enable them to escape on what was called the ‘Underground Railroad’. So, music has always been an integral part of African-American existence and it has been a means of relief, release, joy, political significance, and as I said before, survival.

Laurent Lepaludier: In your works, orality can obviously be heard in the dialogues, especially in Tidewater, and, obviously too, the narrative has an oral quality. When you write, do you actually voice the narrative out loud, or is it a mental voice?

Sandi Russell: No, it’s mental. But sometimes, when I write, I do read out loud to make sure the rhythm is flowing in the manner that I want and it’s giving the feeling I want to evoke. No, it’s all in my head, usually.

Michelle Ryan Sautour: Based on your book, and also something that has come up a lot during the conference is the question of speech patterns and identity and the idea of using speech as a sort of mask, like even adopting a white mask for example in relation to identity. You are adopting an identity, you are using speech as a sort of mask. What are your thoughts on that subject?

Sandi Russell: You’re using speech as a mask, in other words, to mask what you really want to say? Is that what you mean?

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: No, I’m thinking more in terms of speaking in a certain way, in order to create a certain impression of yourself, or to create a certain relation to certain groups, or communities. For example, even yourself as a writer, when you create a character, how do you think in terms of characterization?

Sandi Russell: How do I arrive at these different personae? In black speech, there are many gradations of persona as such. In a great deal of black speech, it is used as a mask. I’m trying to think of Zora Neale Hurston’s saying, something like ‘He might know my name, but he doesn’t know me.’ [‘Got one face for the world to see, ‘nother for what I know is me. He don’t know, he don’t know my mind.’] Essentially, that is what she was saying. Black people, in America, have learned to speak in such a manner that they are answering your question, you think, but they really aren’t answering your question at all. But I don’t think that’s really what you are talking about! [laughs]

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: No, but it’s a very interesting answer.

Audience: The male ‘Cousin’, for instance goes fishing and he gives a whole thing on the ecology of the place, while he’s actually taking himself off to the river. That is a very different speech from Henrietta, because it’s an urban influence speech.
Sandi Russell: *Tidewater* is what Henry Louis Gates calls a very speakerly text. I use many monologues where characters speak directly to the reader, as Henrietta does here. Each person’s speech, in a sense, defines the way they speak, the words they use. The sounds they make do define, at least I try to define who they are through the way they speak. Not necessarily all that they say, but through their speech patterns as well. Am I getting closer? [laughter]

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: You are a writer, and you are also a literary critic. What led you to write your book *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present?* How were you drawn to the writing of this book?

Sandi Russell: I realised, living in Great Britain, that very few people knew about any African-American writers at all. I felt that there was a necessity to let them know about all the great black American women writers that had published. Also, at the time that I had this idea, it was a very exciting time in America because a lot of writers that had not been heard of were being literally unearthed, that had written in the nineteenth century, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. did a great deal to make this come to fruition. It was also an impetus for writing the book. And then, I felt that there were a lot of ideas that were being tossed around in academia that the regular reader, the interested reader of African-American literature should know about. So I set this task for myself, to try to make these ideas that you discuss in such a very complex way just a little bit clearer and easier for a lay reader to fathom. I think it was all of those things together that inspired me to write the book.

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: Could you comment on the title you chose? The meaning, for example, of *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present?*

Sandi Russell: It just means, 'give me my due', 'give to me what is owed me,' 'recognise me'. That is essentially what it means.

Ben Lebdai: 'Not to know is bad. Not to ask is worse.' This African proverb, which you have chosen to accompany your book *Render me my Song*, strikes by its powerful suggestion: that people are responsible if they are ignorant of things. Do you imply that external influences to ignorance do not exist? [laughs]

Sandi Russell: No, I just meant that curiosity is a good thing. I didn’t mean it as literally as that. In my mind, I was thinking that a lot of people knew or know about various writers in the world, and yet they don’t think there is anything of interest in what they have to say; that there is not anything in these writings for them. And essentially, I was saying ‘Yes, you should go beyond your little sphere if you can, and you might learn something new and exciting.’

Ben Lebdai: So, exactly, going on on that same line, shall we talk about curriculum. In schools and faculties in the US? You have written that when you were young, you have been cheated, because black writers, men and women were ignored, using almost the same words as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, when he recalls his education in colonial Kenya, and his English literature courses where African writers were not on the program, and when the African environment was ignored in favour of daffodils and cottages. So, would you describe such a situation in the US as being colonial in spirit?

Sandi Russell: Well, sadly, yes. I went to school in the center of Harlem, but even most of my teachers who were black were not allowed, within the curriculum, to teach African-American literature. We did have one week though. There was a lot of talk...
about Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and George Washington Carver and the peanut. [laughter] That was sadly about it. So yes, I would say that, at that particular time when I was going to school, I learned very little about black American writing, or even black American culture for that matter.

Ben Lebdai: I have worked myself on Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography which was published in 1789. And I was pleased to see in your book Render Me My Song that in fact, the first slave to have expressed her feelings about her situation as a slave is a woman. How do you explain this persistence, in maybe not ignoring, but certainly putting aside women’s expressions, even if it concerns such a painful historical fact, slavery. How do you explain this, because I’ve read it nowhere else except in your book?

Sandi Russell: The reason you most likely hadn’t read it before my book was because it hadn’t come to light, literally. I really found a great deal of new information, new names and new writers while I was writing this book. It was a very exciting period.

Ben Lebdai: In your chapter ‘Black Talk, Black Judgement’, you ponder on the issue of the integration of Black people in America and you suggest that at one point in History, the nation must face the fact that it is not a question of integration, but it is a question of recognition. It is the question of respect also, as expressed in the novels and short-stories by Richard Wright for example. So, has this recognition been reached today in society, in literature, in the US?

Sandi Russell: I’m very pleased to say it has. Many African-American women writers, male writers as well, are almost household names now. We have come a long way since this book and I’m very pleased to say so.

Michelle Ryan-Sautour: We’ve talked a little bit during the conference about the pressures of the publishing industry, a publishing world dominated by white power, as you mention in your book. Could you talk a little bit about how this limited certain ways of writing? And do you think there would be any shifts or developments, any progress in this area?

Sandi Russell: The “white establishment” still has major power in publishing in the Western world. But there have been publishing houses, small, but quite good and quite powerful that are African-American based, Black British based, Caribbean. So that there are voices heard through these publishing houses that might not have been heard at all if it weren’t for them. It’s a difficult problem for any artist, be they black or white, to get into a reputable publishing house. Now, money is the engine that pushes it, rather than good literature. And if you do get in, very often there are restrictions: certain stereotypes are expected today from Black writers. There is a sort of stricture and you can’t move outside of this little box people have envisioned for you. It makes it very hard. They want a very clear-cut narrative – heaven forbid you say anything like ‘modernist’, believe me, it’s not a good word. [laughs] The problems now are not only the problem of coming from an ethnic group, being African-American, but also the restrictive way that we are told we must write in order to make a best-seller.

Ben Lebdai: A more general question. You have heard about what went on in France a few weeks ago in the suburbs. So, speaking about schools, we have been saying that pupils do not pay attention to writing, and so on. I know a little bit about your life now, so as a former teacher, what role do you think orality might play in today’s education in certain schools, suburbs, parts of New York, or difficult areas, as we say today?

Sandi Russell: When you say orality, do you mean within the text?
Ben Lebdai: Teaching through oral means, using orality to convey an education, a message.

Sandi Russell: I think it is very important. I think speech is highly valued now, and of course, there is the media where there is a lot of talking as opposed to, obviously, reading. And I also think that, certainly in African communities, as well as African-American communities, the oral tradition is very strong. I think that would be a means of breaking through or getting through to students. It ties in with their culture. I think that's essential.

Ben Lebdai: For the first time, in one of Angers' conferences, we have a writer, a critic, and a singer in one person. Can you tell us what are the benefits of mixing these genres?

Sandi Russell: I think that the music, for me, informs everything, in a sense. It certainly informs the writing, and the reading. Literary critic... as they say in the North of England, I'm really 'chuffed' to be called that. I don't know if the music informs my criticism, necessarily, I would say that the criticism stands a bit away from the music and the writing. Somebody said to me 'What's it like to be a singer and a writer?', and I said, 'The singing is an extroverted kind of exercise. The writing is very introverted, you're very much inside yourself.' I said 'Quite frankly, I get up some mornings and I feel quite schizophrenic.' It's very hard sometimes to do both, but at the same time, each informs the other.

Audience: Have you ever written a song?

Sandi Russell: That is really strange. No, I haven't except for the little 'ditties' that I write in my stories and in this novel. No, I never have written songs. But it seems that a student that I have wants to collaborate with me, so it will be a first. I don't know why, though. I could never explain it. It just didn't happen.

Audience: Thank you Sandi for the reading. It was very powerful, especially Henrietta, obviously, the voice of this woman, this young woman who is, as you say, in some ways, mad, other, different. We've been talking about, throughout the conference, other voices, different voices. Where does that come from? Because when you were reading that, it was like you were singing last night--it was like a voice that just came out of you, so beautifully and powerfully.

Sandi Russell: I don't know where Henrietta came from. It obviously is a part of me somewhere. But I was shocked when this voice came, such a powerful voice. Some of the history of Henrietta is based on some facts, not a lot of it, just a nugget of it. I wish I could be more precise, but writing is a very strange thing. You can sit down and think you're going to write in a certain way. And, half an hour later, you look at this page and it's not anything like you thought it was going to be at all. I think Henrietta is an amalgamation of, in a way, a silenced Southern voice that isn't heard very much anymore. That is the best I can do.

Audience: I'm just interested in how writers and all of us who work in that area talk about getting the voice. Margaret Lawrence, a Canadian writer, said that she had to get the voice of Hagar, in *The Stone Angel*, and then it just took her, where it was meant to go. As you say, it is a kind of possession.

Sandi Russell: Out of all the characters in *Tidewater*, Henrietta is definitely almost a possession. But she also carries a very important role that I didn't get a chance to read, in that she tells the history of this area in a very fresh way, because she is mad. But her
vision is very clear and very real, much more real than, let’s say, an historian would be in recounting the events of that area.

AUTHORS

LAURENT LEPALUDIER

Laurent Lepaludier, agrégation and Doctorat d’Etat, is a professor of English at the University of Angers where he teaches British literature and critical theory. He has written a thesis on Joseph Conrad. Head of the CRILA research centre of Angers, and in charge of the research on the short story, he is also head of the English section of the CERPECA (the Canadian studies research centre of Angers). He has published articles on XIXth and XXth century British novels and short stories, on Canadian short stories, and a book entitled L’Objet et le récit de fiction (P.U. Rennes). A book entitled L’Image autrement: le visuel dans la nouvelle moderniste de langue anglaise will soon be published. His research currently focuses on fiction and knowledge and on the poetics of narrative fiction.