What is this voice I read? Problematics of orality in the short story

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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. 4

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... 5

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 mimes, 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 crystallise 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.

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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


ABSTRACTS


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