

The return of the bards¹

Developments in American poetry and literary studies²

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For a period of 25 years, say, or as long as it takes a new generation to discover where it lives, take the great Greek epics out of the undergraduate curricula, & replace them with the great American epics. [...] Encourage poets to translate the native American classics [...] but first teach them how to sing. Let young Indian poets (who still can sing or tell-a-story) teach young white poets to do so. Establish chairs in American literature & theology, etc. to be filled by men trained in the oral transmission. [...] Teach courses with a rattle & a drum. (Rothenberg, "An Academic Proposal" 418)

What the poet Jerome Rothenberg proposes in this appeal to American universities is unusual; not only representatives of a classical European education will shake their heads at it: Literature has to do with writing and reading, with texts and their understanding. This broad consensus is based on the role of the book in Western culture, which ultimately goes back to that of the one book, the Bible. Culture as a concept of value and the ability to read and write are so closely linked in our minds that we like to characterize other forms of living together in terms of the absence of writing as scriptless, illiterate, or primitive.

But the focus on the written characters makes us short-sighted. Walter J. Ong, who in his writings has repeatedly tried to work out the fundamental differences between oral and written culture, points out the consequences with a drastic comparison:

To think of [oral cultures] in terms of their relationship to script is the equivalent of working out the biology of

¹ Not published before. English version of the inaugural lecture "Die Rückkehr der Sanger." University of Basel, 1982.

² English version of the public inaugural lecture (in German) at the University of Basel, 1982. Not previously published.

a horse in terms of what goes on in an automobile factory.

[O]ur concept of oral performance has long been derived from our concept of literature even though in actuality it is literature which grows out of oral performance. A parallel, again, would be to refer to a horse never as a horse but always as a four-legged automobile without wheels. (Ong, *The Presence of the Word* 19, 21)

These conflicts will be discussed in the following: How can criticism based on the examination of fixed texts cope with poetry that takes Rothenberg's call seriously? What must a criticism look like that does not let literature and oral poetry exist simply beside each other, does not play them off against each other, but can illuminate both from a central point?

Some aspects of the new interest in oral poetry will be outlined here, as well as elements of the American reception theory that emerged from formalism. Then an attempt will be made to show points of contact and parallels between them and to draw conclusions from them about what tasks and problems face literary studies today.

Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, in their influential publications on the folk epic of southern former Yugoslavia, first made visible fundamental differences between oral poetry and poetry intended for reading and applied them impressively to Homer. In 1960 Lord summarized these investigations in *The Singer of Tales*, a book that has become a classic in its field. Not everything Lord sets forth, however, has stood up before more recent research, as summarized by Ruth Finnegan. It has been shown, for example, that the form of oral poetry he describes is only one of many possible, and that written and oral traditions need not be mutually exclusive to the extent that he claims (Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* 69–79), a problem that will be briefly addressed later.

The characteristics of oral, as distinct from written, poetry, according to Lord, can be briefly summarized as follows: There is no fixed text in our sense, which can be repeated word for word over long stretches. What is fixed are thematic and plot elements, and the form, or melody, of the song (Lord 124–25). That there is no fixed text in our sense is due to the nature of the composition. The work is created anew during each performance, and the singers adhere to certain rules, for example, of meter and style (Lord 13). Their work is facilitated by the fact that they can draw on a

rich set of formulas and stories—sagas, myths—that have put historical events and insights into a memorable form. Under these circumstances, the audience is directly involved in the work: For a receptive audience, the singers may flesh out their song—within the framework of the rules in force—and for an apathetic one, they may shorten it (Lord 14–17). But they are also subject to the control of the audience, as far as the audience is familiar with the subject of the song and the rules of art.

While Lord describes the oral primarily in terms of its effects on the poetic text, later authors, such as McLuhan and Ong, have emphasized the significance of the oral for all cultural phenomena—for religion, the transmission of knowledge, social life, etc. Originality in the sense with which we are familiar, for example, is not permissible in an oral culture, since it endangers the preservation of what is socially valid. There are no books in which to look up what has been forgotten.

Since public law and custom are of major importance for social survival but cannot be put on record, they must constantly be talked about, else they vanish from consciousness. Hence the figures around whom knowledge is made to cluster, those about whom stories are told or sung, must be made into conspicuous personages, foci of common attention, individuals embodying open public concerns [. . .They] must be heroes, culturally “large” or “heavy” figures like Odysseus or Achilles or Oedipus. (Ong, *The Presence of the Word* 204)

Finally, Ong argues, language has a different function in an oral society than in ours. Writing allows us to externalize memory and to store memorable things in objects, books, or computers, for example. Words and their meanings therefore also appear as objects that can be stored and retrieved—the alphabetical dictionary may serve as a particularly obvious example of this. In an oral culture, on the other hand, such a separation between people and knowledge is not possible: meanings show themselves in concrete situations between people; they are, not objects, but events (Ong, *Interfaces of the Word* 21) that produce effects. The speakers exert influence on their environment through them.

We may wonder why the world of the oral has meant so much to American poets since Ezra Pound and Vachel Lindsay, but especially since Charles Olson. One might

think of the emergence of a new, second orality, which McLuhan and Ong derive from the rise of the electronic media: television news replaces the newspaper, the telephone conversation the exchange of letters.⁷

But the new “oral” poets—I shall concentrate on two representatives, Gary Snyder (born 1930) and Jerome Rothenberg (1931-2024)—are hardly interested in the electronic media or reject them. They are concerned with *primary* oral culture--which has, more clearly than Lord and his school have seen, always survived, indeed flourished, alongside the written, and has always fertilized it - in the poetry of regions marginal to literary centres: in Ireland and Wales (William Butler Yeats and Dylan Thomas), in the German-speaking region of Switzerland. Oral elements have also survived in areas that we would be reluctant to count as “culture” because of our fixation on writing: for example, among children who cannot yet read and write.

For U.S. poetry, however, it is also possible to name a variety of specific forces that have existed alongside, acted upon, and transformed reading literature. True, much, most of it, is still available in print today: Rothenberg’s call indicates a direction, not a state. But the relationship between writing and speech has shifted. The recital of a work is no longer to be understood as secondary to the written version, but as equal or even primary.

These oral forces are listed here without the order being meant to suggest weighting: There is African-American culture—its music, especially jazz and blues, but also the sermon and the new black poetry fed from all these sources (Cf. Henderson). There is the poetry of the so-called primitive peoples in general and of the Native Americans in particular: Their influence is based on the one hand on the widespread interest in the primitive since modernism: Ezra Pound wrote his *Cantos* as “the tale of the tribe.” (Pound 194) But even more strongly, their influence today rests on the need to counter the European tradition with an American one of its own—as Rothenberg's appeal shows. There are also the cultures of China and Japan: with Ernest Fenollosa, for example, Ezra Pound mistakenly understood Chinese writing as ideogrammatic, as writing that records ideas, not sounds, and thus leaves open the choice of words and their linkage within a particular framework. Since the Beat generation, Zen Buddhist influences have also intensified, which consider clinging to the ego as a weakness and teach people to let themselves go (esp. Watts 143). This explains certain forms of spontaneous poetry,

improvisation, such as we find in Allen Ginsberg. Finally, in this incomplete list, there is also popular song, which, starting from folk song (mainly of Irish origin), and used for political purposes. Here, the tradition includes Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the protest songs against the Vietnam war.

All these influences could become effective out of a spirit of rebellion against Western technological culture and its forms of organization—McLuhan characteristically traces the invention of the conveyor belt back to the linearity of our writing recording sounds.

The strong social and political component of this revolt plays a crucial role in the revival of oral poetry: Oral poetry, in contrast to that in print and other media, is only possible in a manageable human community—the tribe, for example—but not in the isolation of urban-industrial society. It presupposes community in participation, usually at an agreed location; at the same time, it reinforces community—an experience fundamentally different from the reader's solitary encounter with the book. World literature is not possible in this way, but it is not desirable either: it would have to look like an attempt to destroy the regional diversity of human modes of experience. Within the manageable group, on the other hand, the poets have a central task. It corresponds, according to Rothenberg, to that of the shaman in Siberian and North American tribes: they see, they sing, and they heal (Rothenberg, *Pre-Faces* 134). Poets are prophets; they communicate their visions to their fellow tribespeople and thus also shape their way of seeing the world. They transform themselves and their listeners, bringing them together and thus healing the social fabric.

This function of poetry may seem peculiar to us, but its representatives insist that it is not a special case. Gary Snyder, an ethnologist by training, like Rothenberg, argues that reading and writing have been an infinitesimal part of human experience over the past 40,000 years of human culture—he starts with the cave paintings. It is only in the past two centuries that a considerable part of the population in the so-called civilized countries has learned to read. Oral poetry, as it was eventually recorded in the form of ballads, fairy tales, legends, and songs, has therefore been the most important “literary” experience of humankind (Snyder 18).

Somebody who takes this position can certainly no longer accept literature in the sense with which we are familiar as a standard for verbal art in general. On the contrary, written,

and printed literature and the activity it demands of its users now appear as a special case: something that appeared alongside oral culture in our field a few hundred years ago, came to bloom, and, one must fear, is already beginning to wilt again.

Snyder draws the consequences of his view and considers all verbal art, including printed art, from the oral side. He classifies all poetry according to what it does and how it is used:

There is sacred song and secular song. In the case of sacred song there are two categories: songs which are made of magic syllables and have magical meaning only, and sacred songs which have literal meaning. In the category of secular song, you can think of all the songs of all the people of the world as going through divisions like these: lullabies to sing babies to sleep; playground rhymes for kids; power vision songs of adolescent initiation; courting songs of young people; work songs net-hauling, hammer-swinging, rice-transplanting, canoeing, riding, hunting songs, with a specific magical set of skills and understandings; celebration songs, war songs, death songs.

And he adds, almost casually,

We can fit all our own poetries into these.
(Snyder 36)

Such a view of literature would require a radical rethinking from us. But before getting to this problem, I should like to turn to “literary” literary studies, and to an approach which, as mentioned at the beginning, seems to have nothing to do with the one just outlined.

American literary criticism around the middle of the twentieth century was characterized by several beliefs that have often been combined into a body of doctrine under the name *New Criticism*: The task of criticism, it was argued, was to determine structures inherent in the work. In the final analysis, the work was completely detached as an object from both the author and the recipient. The inclusion of the reader's reaction, for example, which is historically and individually different, would have to lead to a distortion of the structures present in the text itself.

Developments in American literary studies since that time can best be described as an attempt to break free from the constraints of the *New Criticism*. What has emerged is a bewildering but also colourful variety of methodological approaches. Because of the traditional Anglo-Saxon interest in epistemology, the relationship between text and reader

has played a significant role—the problem area that will be briefly discussed here.

Since then, reading has been taken more seriously. The work is now described as a journey, no longer as an ideal structure. In parallel, literary scholars' interest has also shifted, significantly, from the short lyric poem to the narrative. Added to this is the realization that the work is constituted only in the experience of the reader. A printed text without a reader is merely a certain amount of printer's ink distributed in a peculiar way on the paper.

The question is how much the printed text and how much the reader contributes to this experience. The answer may be disconcerting: it is impossible to separate the two components; after all, any analysis, no matter how precise, can only concern the reading experience, not the “object text.” Attempts have nevertheless been made to define the relationship between the two components. This can be understood from the history of literary theory, the dissolution of the *New Criticism*, as well as the fact that in the process the role of the reader has been seen as increasingly important.

In Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*, for example, the readers are active participants in the *concretization* of the text—the term adopted from Roman Ingarden is significant. They not only select from among the various layers of the work; they also give meaning to the empty spaces in the text provided by the author. The readers thus are given a certain amount of freedom within a fixed framework.

But this is a compromise solution: the location of the gaps cannot be determined independently of the reading experience either. Rather, it depends on the readers' expectations and habits—on their interpretive strategy. Even the author's intention is something the readers are making up; for its determination depends on how the readers interpret the clues perceived by them. Even the poet's word itself need not be credible: If, for example, we took all dedications of literary works at their word, literary history would look different from what we are used to. If we give the readers so much authority in interpreting, we could almost say that they write the work for themselves: Writing and reading are then the same thing, an engagement with material at hand: ideas, traditions, texts.

For someone who is used to trusting completely the authority of the text, such a development must look dangerous: it must lead to unbridled relativism, to chaotic conditions. This fear, however, is justified only if we

presuppose that the readers and the author are free individuals in every respect, which is not borne out by the practice of interpretation. Rather, it turns out that interpretations usually agree on essential points, that there are agreements about what is acceptable and what is not. In this, what readers have in front of them must be involved, otherwise they might as well sit in front of a blank page; but what role it plays cannot be objectively determined.

The nature and genesis of these understandings has, of course, preoccupied critics. Jonathan Culler tries to solve the problem by resorting to a concept of grammar, that of competence:

The question is not what actual readers happen to do but what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature. (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* 123–24)

Finally, Stanley Fish goes one step further. Instead of speaking of competence and of an institution of literature, as Culler does, he introduces the concept of *interpretive communities*, which can coexist:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. (Fish 2–11)

Within such a community, therefore, there are clear ideas about what is right or wrong, good, or bad.

In both Fish's and Culler's work, moreover, the legacy of formalism has not yet been overcome. Both Culler's institution of literature and Fish's interpretive communities operate within a closed system that neglects non-literary influences (Lentricchia 147).

But the *interpretive community* is an important concept for us. It takes us back to oral poetry. Contrary to Lord's sharp demarcation between written and oral poetry, the two now seem to have a great deal in common. The reader as singer—this notion may make us sceptical, but it is still worth suggesting the parallels between oral poetry and the work in the view of reception theory.

I am taking up individual points again: as in oral poetry, there is no fixed text, unless we disregard meanings and define the term *text* in terms of the ink on the paper. As in

oral poetry, the work is created anew during each performance or reading. In the process, the readers also adhere to certain rules that are predetermined in their interpretive community; their work is facilitated by the fact that they can draw on a memory treasure of rules and experiences. The transmission of these rules and experiences is similarly problematic to that in a purely oral culture. As in oral poetry, meaning is not contained in the text; rather, it occurs in a particular situation—in this case, the situation of reading.³

The difference between oral and written poetry therefore no longer looks as radical today as it did to Lord and Ong under the impression of the *New Criticism*.

Reception theory, unaware of the parallels, has moved closer over the years to positions that correspond to the conditions of oral poetry. Snyder's demand that all poetry, including written poetry, should be considered from the point of view of oral poetry, thus gains considerable weight; indeed, it seems to have already been partially fulfilled by reception theory!

Under these circumstances, it is appropriate that I conclude by considering what problems this poses for literary studies. In doing so, I am aware that I am only outlining elements of a further interpretive community.

In the following, some questions will be raised and possible new explanations of old problems of literary studies will be sketched, using two examples. How can an interpretive community be defined? How does it come into being? What is the role of literary criticism and the university, but also of non-literary institutions? What are the understandings of the community of interpreting to which we feel ourselves to belong? (Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading") If reading and writing can be equated: How then can knowledge of one be used to explore and teach the other?

³ Certain differences between the reader and the singer cannot be denied despite everything. They arise mainly from the fact that the materials with which the reader works can be multiplied and spread much further thanks to printing technology. Differences also arise from the fact that both the experience of meanings and the reaction to them take place in the reader's consciousness or psyche - not directly in the group as in oral poetry."

All questions of this kind do not concern the meaning of works, but the conditions under which meaning comes about.

The reference to the oral that I have suggested here, allows us to address questions like:

- What is the role of poetry within the community? In doing so, we must move away from the notion of literature as a closed system, separable from social and political life.
- What role does memory play in the transmission and use of material and rules? - A classic, for example, could be defined as a work that has left the book and become part of oral tradition.
- How do oral and written elements combine in authors, works, and historical periods?
- How are allusions used? What knowledge do they presuppose?

Other issues can be explained in new ways. Literary symbols and the question of originality will serve as examples here. When symbols are discussed, semantic questions are commonly foregrounded: what does, for example, the city in Pound's *Cantos* mean? The answers are usually complex—complexity is usually considered the hallmark of the symbol. The approach described here, however, suggests to us a different question: what does the symbol do? The symbol builds community: it is, as the etymological meaning of the word suggests,⁴ a mark of recognition. It may mean different things in different situations, to different people who recognize it (hence its “complexity”—but that does not matter in this context.

The most common example of this phenomenon is the cross that unites Christians. Nothing prevents us from also looking at a symbol like the city in Pound's *Cantos* in the same way, as part of Pound's private mythological system. The symbol is an invitation to engage with the poets and what they stand for, to join them and count oneself among the same community. Pound in particular is an example of how a poet may gather a community around him: his critics can be divided surprisingly clearly into two groups; some belong to his circle, or *tribe*; others reject his work with a stridency that can best be explained by the rejection of Pound's pretensions.

⁴ The word *symbol* derives from the Greek verb, *symbollein*, meaning “to put together,” and the related noun *symbolon*, meaning “mark,” “token,” or “sign,” in the sense of the half-coin carried away by each of the two parties of an agreement as a pledge. Preminger 833.

Incidentally, the specialisms that have developed in literary studies, as elsewhere, should also be examined in this context: people occupy themselves with the work of an author throughout their lives, call themselves Spenserians, Shakespeareans, or Joyceans, and come together at specially organized conferences—under the word of their author, so to speak.

To sum up: recent American poetry reminds us to take oral forms of life seriously again, indeed that there is poetry that cannot be understood without them. Recent developments in literary criticism show us that the importance of oral elements should not be underestimated even in the discussion of poetry in general.

I started by quoting Jerome Rothenberg's demand: "Teach courses with a rattle and a drum!" Should we now join him, and what he stands for? Certainly not! And we, as Europeans, should not delete the great Greek epics from our curricula. But we should make elements to which he draws our attention part of our own interpretation strategy.

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