

# On the Oral Foundations of Literate Culture<sup>1</sup>

v. 02-09-2025

The title promises something fundamental, or at least something general. However, I can only hint at matters that deserve a more thorough treatment. At the same time, I am aware that my perspective as a literary scholar inevitably narrows my view (I shall return to this point). I shall deal with how the relationship between orality and literacy in our culture should be viewed, using three examples for illustration: the poetry reading, the role of the reader, and the concept of the classic.

At poetry readings, the authors and the audience face each other. Between them lies the central object of the event: a book, a manuscript—the text. The speakers maintain no eye contact with the audience—as would be expected in a public speech. The poet’s gaze is immersed in the text; and even the audience, unless they are reading along, turn their eyes inward and sit motionless, like meditating individuals. The author speaks with a flat intonation, deliberately avoiding any personal tone, allowing the text to speak for itself.

But it need not be this way: During a stay in the U.S., I attended many poetry readings. One, in particular, remains vividly with me: an evening with the poet Galway Kinnell (1927-2014). He knew his poems by heart, stood in front of us, looked at us, and recited them, transforming the event entirely and giving his work a completely different status, electrifying but also disturbing.

But the standard poetry readings are best described as attempts to imitate silent reading as faithfully as possible. One could hardly imagine a more literate event. Yet even here, elements are at play that belong to the world of orality: The speaker responds to the audience by adjusting speed, intonation, timbre, etc., and by omitting or adding texts, even extending or shortening the program based on

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<sup>1</sup> Not published before. Revised and translated text of a guest lecture, University of Freiburg (Germany), 1987.

audience reaction, just as Lord describes the work of the epic singer. In this sense, although it highlights the text's written character, such a reading becomes an event with distinctly oral traits.

One might object that readings are exceptions compared to silent reading. I would argue the opposite: orality plays an integral role even in our literary culture; writing is something superimposed upon it and cannot exist without constant interaction with orality. I will first sketch this idea in general terms and then attempt to support it with two examples.

From the perspective of my thesis, let me briefly recap a few key differences between oral and literate cultures, to which I will return. In an oral culture, what is forgotten is irretrievably lost. There is nothing to look up. Everything must be done to preserve socially important knowledge—what we call literature is related to this, in my view. Such knowledge is shaped into memorable forms: stories (myths), proverbs, and formulaic expressions serve this purpose. There are no fixed texts, only rules and customs for recreating works anew in each situation. Originality, which our culture holds in such high esteem, can be threatening here, as it endangers the transmission of rules. Conciseness cannot be a virtue; on the contrary, repetition and variation are vital for survival.

There are diverse ways of conceiving the relationship between orality and literacy. One can view them as mutually exclusive cultural types, as Albert B. Lord seems to suggest: once writing becomes effective, orality is doomed. One could even describe the shift to writing as a kind of fall from grace, as suggested by Marshall McLuhan. Others, like Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody, view the transition more gradually or as differentiated across domains.

These approaches share two assumptions: First, our culture is a literate one. This is often taken for granted, even by scholars of oral poetry. But this is a circular argument: our culture is literate because we define *culture* by what is written. The ability to read is still too readily equated with education. This becomes especially clear in laments about the decline of reading, such as in Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Secondly, they assume that there is a historical sequence from orality to literacy (and possibly back again). It is always the transitions that are emphasized—and debated. Where orality and literacy are opposed as cultural types, their interaction is only conceived in terms of transition.

This view of the relationship between oral and literate culture became a tradition in itself; and as so often, the origin of that tradition has become part of the structure it seeks to describe.

That oral and written culture exclude one another, as Lord, especially in the second chapter of Lord's *The Singer of Tales*. and even more so McLuhan, claimed, can be explained by the dominant paradigm of their time: a concept of verbal art rooted in the notion of writing and the fixed text.

We should also remember that the scholars who introduced us to the concept of "oral poetry" were literary scholars. Milman Parry was a professor of classical philology, a field with a particularly strong tradition of textual analysis. His student, Albert B. Lord, submitted the first version of *The Singer of Tales* as a dissertation in comparative literature; and also Marshall McLuhan, who generalized Lord's approach, was a literary scholar.

Our current historical moment makes it easier to recognize something literary scholars long overlooked: the role of orality in their own culture. We have reached a point from which we can begin to view our culture again through the lens of orality.<sup>2</sup>

My thesis, then, is this: Writing is not an alternative to orality, but something that exists only alongside it and depends on interaction with it. Put historically: *there is no simple switch from orality to writing; the oral is always present; writing can flourish on this substrate in certain times and areas.*

I would like to illustrate this, as mentioned, with two examples concerning central phenomena of literate culture.

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<sup>2</sup> This may come more easily to me as a German-speaking Swiss: unlike those who first developed the orality-literacy paradigm, we live with two languages side by side, a dialect that we speak but can hardly write, and a standard language that we write but only speak with effort.

The first concerns the practice of reading and also shows how orality has infiltrated literary theories—often without our realizing it. Reception theory is, among other things, an attempt to move beyond the outdated and problematic paradigm of formalism. Many such attempts share the goal of expelling the spirit of Platonic idealism. The “freedom” of the reader is a key element in this shift away from formalism.

Here, the authority of the text is questioned: how far and in what way is of interest to my argument. In Wolfgang Iser’s version—one we might call orthodox—the readers play an active role in concretizing the text. They do not merely choose from layers the text offers but also fill textual gaps with meaning. Within a defined framework, the reader is granted a certain degree of freedom.

But this is a compromise that, as Stanley Fish has shown, is unsatisfactory. The location of gaps cannot be determined independently of the reading experience. They depend on the reader’s expectations and interpretive strategies. If, as Fish argues, gaps are not in the text itself but arise (or do not) depending on interpretive strategy, then there is no distinction between what the text contributes and what the reader does; according to Fish, the reader contributes everything. This is, however, too simple: The text clearly plays a role—otherwise, we could read a blank page. But we cannot objectively distinguish how much the text and how much the reader contributes to what we call the work.

Such a view can seem alarming to someone used to relying on the authority of the text: it leads to boundless relativism and apparent chaos. Yet interpretive practice contradicts this fear: the readers’ freedom is limited by traditions that have shaped them and the conventions they share with others. These enable communication. We generally agree to a remarkable extent on what we see in a text—and even on where our interpretations diverge.

Fish attempted to capture this experience with the term *interpretive community*: in such a community, there are fixed rules for reading texts, for what is acceptable and what is not. Fish even defines these communities by their shared strategies. But here lies the weakness of his concept: he defines it solely by reference to literature, as a closed system. He exposes the limits of formalism but does not move beyond them.

Nonetheless, the concept of *interpretive community* is particularly relevant here, because it connects with the conditions of oral poetry. As in oral poetry, there is no fixed text, unless we define it simply as strangely distributed ink on paper. As in oral poetry, the work is recreated anew with each performance, that is, with each reading. As in oral poetry, meaning is not in the text but occurs in a specific situation. Like singers in oral cultures, readers follow certain rules and customs when engaging with a text, rules and customs that are valid within their community. These rules and customs are based on experience, and their transmission is just as vulnerable as the transmission of tradition in an oral culture. For these rules cannot be conveyed in writing.

Is the reader then a singer? The similarities are greater than one might have assumed. They also cast the differences, which cannot be denied, in a new light. Unlike someone participating in an oral event, the reader is, of course, alone. In the terms of oral poetry: the reader is both singer and listener, and the boundary between the two runs through the reader. This is the source of the awareness that Ong associates with writing (Ong 102). It is also the origin of an analytical approach to literature, in which the singer and listener components within the reader enter dialogue with one another—an approach that reached its peak in the history of literary criticism with formalism.

An approach to literature that takes into account the oral dimension has many consequences for how we deal with literature, not only that the concept of the *interpretive community* can be redefined in a more precise way. The role of literature in society also appears in a new light. I would like to illustrate this with the concept of the classic.

What is a classic? In brief, classics are works that are read and performed again and again—works that every era finds significant in its own way. They are often described as timeless. But why do they endure, while others fade?

Two main answers have been offered: the first assumes an abundance of meaning. Each new interpretation can only tap into a fraction of what the work contains, which is why it continues to yield something new. A well-known articulation of this view appears in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*: there, a literary work is defined as a

structure of norms that can only ever be partially realized in any act of reception. The second answer assumes not abundance, but openness or even emptiness of meaning. This view is associated with critics like Roland Barthes and Frank Kermode. Here, classics are seen as open texts, adaptable and available for readers and audiences to project their own concerns into, again and again.

However, both positions fail to answer a central question: Why are *these* texts read and performed repeatedly? Why is so much sought in them, or projected into them? Surely there could be many other works just as open—but we don't know them, simply because they are not constantly re-read or re-performed. In other words, it cannot be the text's qualities alone that make a work a classic.

This cannot be explained by referring solely to books. Instead, one could say: classics are works that have *left the book* and taken on an existence beyond it. They are primarily present in people's memories and speech—in three main forms: stories, figures, and proverbial expressions.

We refer to Shakespeare's stories and situations to interpret daily experiences: Petruchio's taming of Katherine, the relentless feud between the Montagues and Capulets. We use characters reduced to their essential traits to describe people: Iago, the cold-hearted villain, Falstaff, the cowardly, boastful hedonist. And in everyday language, we use quotations as idioms and proverbs. In fact, many of these sayings could be described as proverbs whose authors have not yet been forgotten.

The three forms in which a classic lives on—stories, characters, proverbial sayings—are precisely those that play a central role in the verbal art of oral cultures: myths, heroes, proverbs. We may therefore say that classics are works that also exist in oral versions.

The universality and timelessness often attributed to classics is just as limited as that of oral poetry: everyone speaks of Shakespeare, but the English Shakespeare differs from the German one; the Shakespeare of today differs from that of the 19th-century educated elite.

An approach that assumes the interaction of orality and literacy in our culture raises many questions directly tied to the social function of literature—but it also provides answers.

Instead of defining *interpretive communities* purely through reading strategies, we can now work with a notion of community grounded in anthropology and sociology. In this framework, classics exist as *public symbols* (Cp. Engler) that both shape and sustain communities. What matters is not the specific meaning of the symbols, but the fact that they are *perceived as meaningful*. The same symbol can be attributed different meanings by different communities. Shakespeare, for example, can be seen as a universal poet, a national poet, a theatrical genius, or a master of poetic imagery. Only works that exist in such ways are read at all.

If we accept this model, we cannot depend on the text alone. Non-literary factors may play a role. In Shakespeare's case, it's important to consider how his work, in the 18th century—when he first became a *classic*—was used to illustrate values important to the rising bourgeoisie, such as the development of a rich inner life.

Issues we used to see as peripheral become central: What prompts us to read a classic? *How* do we read? Our engagement with a classic is shaped by *ritual acts*. This draws attention to many things we have always *practiced* but have not been able to explain or contextualize.

The poetry reading I began with, for instance, no longer appears as something merely focused on the text. The relationship between text and reader can be explained within a model that gives both their place. And the classic gains a more definite role in culture.

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