1. The Orality of Literature

The power of print is still so great that all the verbal arts, with the exception of drama, are commonly considered in terms of reading—the silent interaction between a text and an individual. This model has been so strong that the art of performing literature has been neglected by students of literature and given over to 'oral interp,' a branch of the theatrical arts, in which expressiveness of the sort associated with the stage is 'scaled down' for smaller pieces. Students of literature, left with no sense of what to do orally with a text, grow mute or worse. In the usual public reading, whether by an author or a scholar, the text is the central object, placed between speaker/reader and audience. The speaker is indeed often little more than a reader, who, trying to efface the effect of his personality, recites with a flat intonation, almost monotonously, and avoids eye contact with his audience. The listeners turn their glance inward, sitting motionless, individuals in meditation. This, one might say, is the closest the performance of literature can get to becoming an imitation of reading a book.

Yet even in such a public reading, factors are at work that are alien to the world of print, factors that are—as we may be surprised to realize—associated with oral rather than literate culture: The reader will respond to the audience by adapting speed, intonation, and timbre, by dropping texts from the program and substituting others, or even, if the audience suggests this by their response, by extending the program. The program as a whole may therefore be said to be created, in a sense, by the community of those participating in the poetry reading.

Such phenomena as these are difficult for literary critics to deal with. We are used to discussing a text alone, in relation to other texts, or
in relation to the reader. We are still struggling with the notion of the literary text as an autonomous structure, or, at least, as something that can be isolated from the non-literary sphere, because, for example, it is supposedly marked by specific linguistic traits. Therefore we generally neglect the fact that the experience of a verbal work of art is always only part of a more comprehensive event: something leads up to it and shapes it, and it has an effect on what follows; and it is embedded in a rich context of not only aesthetic, but also psychological, social, and political phenomena.

It is hard for us today to break the habit of considering literature exclusively in terms of fixed texts that are written and read, even though this way of experiencing verbal art has been common for only a few centuries and in only some parts of the world. This habit is supported in Western culture by a tradition of reading that ultimately grows out of the central role of the one book, the Bible. Literacy and culture are so closely associated in our minds that we tend to characterize other cultures by the absence of writing in them, as 'illiterate' or, in a word that is often virtually synonymous, as 'primitive'; because we place such a high premium on literacy, the terms 'illiterate' and 'primitive' will often be used in a derogatory sense.

Our fixed glance at letters has made us myopic, unable to appreciate the differences between oral and literate cultures and equally at a loss to recognize unsuspected similarities. Walter J. Ong, who has consistently studied these relations, characterizes the situation with a drastic metaphor:

To think of [oral cultures] in terms of their relationship to script is the equivalent of working out the biology of a horse in terms of what goes on in an automobile factory.... Our concept of oral performance has long been derived from our concept of literature despite the fact that 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. (*The Presence of the Word* 19, 21)

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1 E.g., in Russian Formalism, and Structuralism. Pratt discusses the problematic of this assumption in her chapter 'The 'Poetic Language' Fallacy,' 3-37.

2 Pattison tries to counteract this tendency by redefining literacy in very general terms: 'Consciousness of the uses and problems of language is the foundation of literacy, but the literate person must also be able to express this consciousness in the ways evolved and sanctioned by the culture in which he lives' (6). This has the advantage of redefining the border between cultural development and its absence; but it also throws accepted terminology into confusion, and it has the absurd consequence that persons in oral cultures may be as literate as those living in literate cultures.
The pioneering studies of oral literature were those of Milman Parry and his student Albert B. Lord, undertaken in the period between the wars. Parry and Lord, in their publications about the folk epic of southern Yugoslavia, suggested basic differences between oral poetry and texts to be read, and they applied their findings to the works of Homer, with impressive results. In 1960 Lord summarized their findings in *The Singer of Tales*, a book that has become a classic in its field. Marshall McLuhan describes his study *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) as in 'many ways complementary' (1) to Lord's, offering an amplification of Lord's theses and dealing with culture in general, rather than with poetry alone.

Lord recognized one oral poetic mode and contrasted it to the patterns of literate poetry. In the oral mode there is no fixed text which can be repeated word for word. Only elements of the action, certain themes, formulas, and the form in general are passed on in tradition (124-25). The absence of a fixed text results from the manner of composition: 'an oral poem is not composed for but in performance' (13). The singer creates his song anew on each occasion, using certain rules set by tradition. Under these circumstances the audience can directly influence the song, in particular its length. If they prove to be receptive, the singer may elaborate on his story; if they show a lack of interest, he may shorten his song (14-17). But he is also under the control of a 'critical audience' (24) in other respects: they are familiar with the rules of his art and possibly with the subject of his song.

The implications of this manner of composition have been worked out by McLuhan and Ong. Three among them are crucial in the context of this study. First, originality and individualism, so prized in our culture, are not admissible in an oral culture, because they endanger the tradition, the passing on, of values. What is forgotten will forever be lost—there are no books in which to look it up.

Since public law and custom are of major importance for social survival but cannot be put on record, they must constantly be talked about or sung 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)
In other words, poetry in an oral society serves a clearly didactic function.

Second, language in an oral society has, according to Ong, a function different from its function in our culture. Writing makes it possible to exteriorize memory and to store knowledge in objects, like books or computers. Because of this, meanings come to be regarded as objects that can be stored and retrieved—the alphabetically arranged dictionary is a good example of this. In an oral culture, on the other hand, it is not possible to separate mind and knowledge in this way. Meanings exist in particular situations among human beings; they are events that have effects on the situation in which they are used. By speaking, persons exert influence on their surroundings (The Presence of the Word 32-33).

Third, oral poetry—in contrast to poetry disseminated by print or the electronic media—is only possible in a homogeneous community of restricted size, like the tribe in the so-called primitive world; it is unthinkable in a large urban-industrial society, consisting of relatively isolated individuals (this distinction will be given more precision in Chapter 2). Oral poetry presupposes a community attending and participating, and it reinforces the cohesion in turn.

Oral poetry, therefore, can never be 'world literature'; oral poets would have no interest in such a notion. Often, however, they have more powerful roles than do poets in literate societies, central roles in the groups in and for which they work. They may serve their communities as persons of magic power (like the shamans in Siberian and traditional North-American societies) or they may be the historians of their people (like the epic singers studied by Lord).

Though The Singer of Tales appeared in 1960, much of the conceptual background dates from the first half of the century. Lord's supposition (and McLuhan's popularization of it) that oral and literate cultures are necessarily mutually exclusive is today regarded as extreme, but it can be explained by the radical ruling paradigm he was confronting—the New Criticism, which, according to Ong, represents 'a rather final break with the older rhetoric [which still had its roots in orality] in the way it fixes the eye unflinchingly on chirographic [handwritten] and typographic expression.' (Interfaces of the Word 216)

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The situation today looks different for two reasons. We have come to see that our culture is not as entirely literate as Lord seems to have
assumed; and recent research, admirably surveyed by Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Poetry*, has shown that the type of oral poetry described by Lord is only one among many, and that orality and literacy are not as mutually exclusive as he and his followers claimed (58-69). In other words, the dividing line between the two culture types is not as sharply defined as Lord suggests.

Second, both literary practice and literary theory have again taken up terms and notions that are in many ways similar to those of oral culture. I should like to illustrate this point by discussing examples from both areas.

Since the rise of ethnopoetics and the poetics of performance in the mid-seventies, the role of the group and of oral performance has again become a focus of interest. This has also brought about, according to Jerome Rothenberg,

> a new sense of function in art, in which the value of a work isn't inherent in its formal or aesthetic characteristics--its shape or its complexity or simplicity as an object--but in what it does, or what the artist or his surrogate does with it, how he performs it in a given context (*Pre-Faces* 168).

The poem, in other words, is an 'instrument-of-power' (168-69). This reflects a new notion of the relationship between the poet and the audience:

> Among us the poet has come to play a performance role that resembles that of the shaman. . . . The poet like the shaman typically withdraws to solitude to find his poem or vision, then returns to sound it, give it life. He performs alone . . ., because his presence is considered crucial & no other specialist has arisen to *act* in his place. He is also like the shaman in being at once an outsider, yet a person needed for the validation of a certain kind of experience important to the group. And even in societies otherwise hostile or indifferent to poetry as 'literature,' he may be allowed a range of deviant, even antisocial behavior that many of his fellow-citizens do not enjoy. Again like the shaman, he will not only be allowed to act mad in public, but he will often be expected to do so (*Pre-Faces* 134).

It is probably the situation described by Rothenberg that has also led to the renewed interest in poetry readings, typically by poets presenting their own work.

> Only a few consequences of this view of the poet and his task can be sketched here; others will be discussed in some detail later on. First of all, the very definition of literature changes. The poetry characteristic of a literate society, far from serving as a model, rather appears to be something in-between, even a special case. The poet Gary Snyder, for exam-
ple, points out that literate societies represent only

a very small part of human experience; literacy representing an even tinier part of human experience, since it's only been in the last two centuries that any sizable proportion of any civilized country has had much literacy. Thus oral literature, the ballad, the folktale, myth, the songs, the subject matter of 'ethnopoetics' has been the major literary experience of mankind (The Old Ways 18).

Because he is looking at literature from the viewpoint of orality, Snyder defines poetic genres according to purpose and situation.

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; working 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. We can fit all of our own poetries into these (The Old Ways 36).

This systematic account also reminds us that on the margins of what we commonly call literature there exist kinds of human expression that are closely related to orality. Their existence alongside literate culture, and, even more, their invigorating interaction with it, make dubious any neat distinction between oral and literate cultures and their mutual exclusiveness.

First, all cultures are, with the possible exception of some narrowly defined areas within them, always oral.

When men learn to write they do not then forget how to speak. Even with writing, much information--probably most information necessary for fundamental human activity--continues to be passed along solely by speech and held in the mind without written records. (Pattison 24)3

3 The same point is made by Paul Zumthor: 'Nul ne songerait nier l'importance du rôle que jouèrent, dans l'histoire de l'humanité, les traditions orales: les civilisations archaïques, et bien des cultures marginales aujourd'hui encore, se maintinrent uniquement ou principalement grâce à elles. Il nous est plus difficile de les penser en termes non historiques, et spécialement de nous convaincre que notre propre culture en est emprgnée et aurait du mal à subsister sans elles.' (10).
The importance of orality in our culture is perhaps most striking where it concerns literacy itself: Even the art of reading has to be passed on by speech.

Literate culture may be dominant in urban centers with their so-called 'high culture'; but oral elements have survived and flourished in regions that are distant from them, like Ireland and Wales, and are reflected, for example, in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and Dylan Thomas. They have survived and flourished among minorities: in the culture of blacks in the United States, represented by jazz, blues, gospel, the black sermon, rapping etc., and reflected in the new Black poetry; in the poetry of so-called primitive peoples all over the world, as documented by students and practitioners of ethnopoetics and reflected in the literature of Third World countries. Oral elements have also survived and flourished in so-called popular culture: in the art of telling jokes, for example, in popular song, which in some cases goes back to folk song, as represented in the United States by the tradition of Woody Guthrie; and it has always thrived in the culture of pre- and semi-literate children.4

All this suggests that the kind of literature commonly considered in critical studies is a limited concern, both historically and systematically. Reading literature from a book is indeed a relatively rare case among a variety of traditions, largely oral, spanning human history.

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If we turn from literary practice to literary criticism, we soon notice that this special case, i.e., reading literature from a book, is less distinctive than we may have expected. Contrastive notions of orality and literacy enjoyed a brief fashion in the sixties. Marshall McLuhan's studies, in particular The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographical Man (1962), managed to create a short-lived interest in his application of thesees about orality and intellectual history to Western culture as a whole; but as his presentation did not conform to traditional scholarly style, he was not always taken seriously. Even his colleague Walter J. Ong, who has continued to defend and to develop McLuhan's position in a more conventional and therefore more acceptable manner, has not managed to keep the interest alive as much as it would deserve. Other

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4 This is impressively represented in Iona and Peter Opie's collection of The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren.
problems have come to preoccupy critics--structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, etc. It may therefore come as a surprise to find that recent literary criticism has nevertheless engaged concerns similar to those sketched here.

Literary criticism, especially in the United States, has struggled, in the last twenty years, to free itself from the shackles of the Formalist paradigm. This has happened in a variety of ways: what most of them share is the attempt to exorcise the ghost of Platonic idealism, the belief that knowledge can be separated from the knower--a view that, as Ong has shown, derives much of its force from conditions created by writing. It is beyond the scope of this study to survey these developments in literary criticism; among them one should mention the death of the author as an institution in criticism, as postulated by Roland Barthes, and the rejection of the self-as-presence in Jacques Derrida (even if this is done by giving privilege to writing over the voice). Instead I shall sketch one development, reader-response criticism.

Formalist critical discussion long neglected the problems of the relationship between the text and the reader, assuming it to be a constant factor, irrelevant to critical assessment. The evaluation of a literary work of art in terms of its effect on an audience was branded, by Wimsatt and Beardsley, as the affective fallacy (The Verbal Icon 21). But in recent years the claim that a work of literature is autonomous has increasingly come under attack by those who insist that the printed text, without somebody to read and interpret it, is only a certain amount of printer's ink strangely distributed on a sheet of paper. The variety of possible readings cannot be ascribed simply to the incompetence of some readers in dealing with the complexities of the text. The variety of reader responses must therefore be taken into consideration by critical theory.

The movement toward reader-oriented criticism has received support from developments in linguistic philosophy, in particular speech-act theory. According to this theory a given utterance must be considered in the situation in which it is used and to which it has to be appropriate in order to serve its function; meaning is a function of effect. In Austin's classic definition of the 'perlocutionary act,

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5 It is significant that in a collection of essays on recent approaches in criticism, Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, edited by Josué V. Harari, none of the scholars most closely associated with the new interest in orality is even mentioned (Albert B. Lord, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong).
saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them (How to Do Things with Words 101).

There are striking similarities between Austin's definition and Ong's account of how meaning has to be viewed as an event in oral cultures, similarities that suggest the possibility of convergence between the study of oral poetry and of literate literature.

As soon as the reader, the one who is addressed by and responds to any utterance, is taken seriously, the experience of the utterance becomes crucial. In the case of literature this approach stipulates the revaluation of the reading experience. The work of literature is no longer viewed as a complete structure, as an ideational sculpture, but as a journey, with a beginning and an ending, enlarging and transforming the reader's mind, and leaving memories behind.

New questions are raised: What is the contribution of the text to the reading experience? What is the reader's contribution to it? These questions cannot be answered empirically--because we can only analyze readings, i.e., the results of mind meeting text; the 'object' text, in other words, is only available in readers' versions of it. Answers to these questions must therefore either be anarchic and impressionistic, or derived from explicit philosophical positions concerning the nature of perception, individual freedom, etc. The latter group of answers marks out an area of intense debate and rapid shifts of position.

The notion of the reader's 'freedom' offers a good example of how positions can shift, away from Formalism in the direction of what some might suspect to be anarchy. At one end of the spectrum, critics take the position that the proper response is exclusively determined by the text (e.g., Riffaterre); at the other end we find an approach in which the text seems to have surrendered all authority over the reader's experience.

Wolfgang Iser's theory of reception, as presented in The Act of Reading, stands between these two extreme positions. It assigns the reader an active role in 'concretizing the text' (a term, adopted from

6 It is probably no coincidence that Austin himself is remembered for his lectures rather than his (few) publications. Indeed, How to Do Things with Words is based partly on his own notes, partly on the notes of those who attended the lectures, and partly on recordings made for the radio.

7 The essays in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, perhaps best document such shifts.
Roman Ingarden, that has Formalist implications). Readers, Iser says, choose among the levels that are given in a work of literature; readers also fill in the gaps (Leerstellen) and indeterminacies left by the text. In other words, they are guided but left some freedom by the text; their collaboration is essential in creating the work of literature.

It may be argued that this is not a centrist position, but, as Stanley Fish claims, merely a compromise solution, and one that is logically inconsistent. The place and kind of gaps and indeterminacies cannot be described without the intervention of the reading process and the reader's interpretive strategies shaping it.

If gaps are not built into the text, but appear (or do not appear) as a consequence of particular interpretive strategies, then there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; he supplies everything. (Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser 7)

To somebody who is used to trusting the authority of the text, in the manner of the Formalist tradition, a view such as Fish's must be alarming, because it apparently implies boundless relativism and must lead to utter chaos. But this fear is only justified if we assume that the readers and the author are free in all respects—and this is not the case: The readers' freedom is restricted. Not only do philosophical arguments suggest this; so does the fact that both author and reader are working within language, a means of social communication relying on shared meanings, and that they live within certain traditions which have shaped them and which they share with other human beings. As a consequence, the practice of interpretation shows results with a degree of concurrence that we would not otherwise expect. We do usually agree on certain features that we observe in a text, as well as on specific areas in which we disagree. What the readers have in front of them undoubtedly plays a role in this—otherwise we could just as well sit in front of an empty sheet—but it remains impossible to determine 'objectively' what that role is.

What are these agreements and where do they come from? Jonathan Culler has tried to account for them by adapting Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence.

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8 For Iser's rejoinder see his 'Talk like Whales.' There is a good account of this exchange in Robert C. Holub's Reception Theory, 102-104.
The question is not what actual readers happen to do [Chomsky's *performance*] 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 [Chomsky's *competence*]. (*Structuralist Poetics* 123-24).

The ideal reader is a 'theoretical construct' (124), validated by the institution of literature. By introducing the notion of *institution* (which is not discussed in detail) and of *convention* as a crucial aspect of it, Culler uses sociological concepts as the basis of literary judgment. Culler takes it for granted that there is one institution of literature in a society, which is to a considerable extent shaped by the teaching of literature in the universities (121). It is clear, however, that Culler has not fully assimilated the social terms he uses into the framework of literary theory.

Stanley Fish goes further and gives up the notion of the single institution of literature. Instead he introduces the notion of 'interpretive communities,' which can exist beside each other in a society. Within such a community there are clear rules about how texts should be read, what is acceptable and what is not (see below, Chapter 2).

Both Culler and Fish still stand firmly within the tradition of Formalism insofar as both separate literature from other phenomena and study it as a closed system. They include in the system the reader as a theoretical construct, but not as a person whose reading interacts with other activities in his life. In the end, however, Fish reaches a position which demands that we move beyond the sphere of literature; it is based on shared interpretive strategies and may result in a sense of community. I shall return to a more detailed analysis of his use of the term 'interpretive community' in Chapter 2.

The notion of the 'interpretive community' is of particular interest to us because it links up with the conditions of oral poetry, as they were sketched above, even though the representatives of the two approaches

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9 The importance ascribed to the universities in describing the institution of literature indicates Culler's American background. A European perspective would not allow them as central a role.

10 This is essentially the objection raised against the Constance school (Iser, Jauss, and their colleagues) by Marxist critics, e.g. in the volume *Gesellschaft--Literatur--Lesen: Literaturrezeption aus theoretischer Sicht* (for a summary see Holub 121-130, esp. 129-130). But any approach that does not view literature as autonomous would offer the same critique of Iser.
do not seem to be aware of this. In *Orality and Literacy* Walter J. Ong writes that reader-response criticism 'is intimately aware that writing and reading differ from oral communication' (171), but this claim has to be treated with caution: it is patently wrong as far as Derrida is concerned, whom Ong rather dubiously lumps together with others in this respect, and, more importantly, it ignores the similarities between the study of oral poetry and reader-response theory.

What conclusion should we draw from these parallels? Is the reader a singer of tales? The similarities are striking. As in oral poetry there is no fixed text--unless we neglect meaning and define *text* as the printer's ink on the paper. As in oral poetry the work of literature is re-created during each performance, i.e., each reading. As in oral poetry, therefore, meaning is not 'contained' in the text but is rather an event in a particular situation. As in oral poetry, finally, readers, in dealing with the material in front of their eyes, obey certain rules and practices, which are valid within their (interpretive) community. These are based on previous experience, and *their transmission is problematic in the same way tradition is in an oral society.*

We can now approach the differences between the two modes of experiencing poetry, listening and reading, in a new way. A crucial difference is obvious from the situations in which the two types of verbal art occur: Unlike the person participating in the event of oral poetry, the reader is alone. In terms of oral poetry, the reader is both singer and audience, and the division between the two, to the extent that it exists in oral poetry, is situated within one person. The fellowship with others in the audience remains imaginative. This is the source of the kind of self-consciousness Ong associates with writing (*Orality and Literacy* 102); it is also the source of an analytical approach to poetry in which the singer and audience parts of the reader engage in a dialogue.

An approach to modern Western literature that allows for its oral aspects has manifold consequences, to which I shall return in the course of my study. It raises new questions: Is it possible to define an interpretive community? What is the role of poetry within the community? How does this affect discussion of poetic technique? In treating these and other questions, we have to get beyond the notion of literature as a closed system that can be isolated from the religious, social, and political life of a community.

Some of the implications of this claim will be dealt with in the following chapters. They discuss and illustrate the relationship between community and symbol, and the dynamics of symbolism.