**Literature and Technology**

# Walter Ong's theory of orality in literary research

Profiting from the fact that I was given a difficult privilege to open the section, I am going to ask you some fundamental questions and, remembering about time, at once answer them as much precisely as I can.

What is technology? The most popular today's collocations of this word are "information technology" (IT) and "digital technology", but the meaning of the word, as my colleagues in following presentations will presumably show, is much broader. Greek root means "knowledge (logos) of a skill (techne)". It is worth to remark that there is no material aspect in its root meaning, whereas in our modern usage of this word this material aspect seems to dominate the whole notion and moves it towards the vocabulary of engineering. Thinking about technology nowadays most people would probably imagine some shining LCD screens. However, the term "technology" should be understood in much broader way.

The title of one of the most known papers of Walter Jackson Ong starts with a sentence "Writing is a Technology". Then we read: (quote) "Literacy is imperious \im-'pir-ē-əs\. It tends to arrogate to itself supreme power by taking itself as normative for human expression and thought."(end quote)[1]. It looks like today we would be willing to add that almost every technology, especially digital, seems imperious and tends to force us to take it as obvious and indispensable element of our reality.

I heard once an opinion of a prominent specialist of Old Polish literature that the usage historian of literature can have out of Ong's theory of orality is limited as far as chronology is concerned. Residua of oral literature, such as this sang by bards, minstrels, Minnesänger, or troubadours, disappear very quickly in written or printed literary texts. This statement clearly exemplifies misunderstanding which Ong's theory can meet with. First of all, the term "oral literature" contains "*contadictio in adiecto*" and illustrates the bias that the imperious literacy caused in our perception. A neologism "orature" doesn't help too much. On the other hand, the need for changing our perspective should have us realize that we'd rather not talk about residua of oral stories but rather about innovations printing

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1   The Written Word. Literacy in transition. Wolfson College Lectures 1985, ed. by Gerd Baumann, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1986, p. 23.

is introducing.

My thesis would be that "oral residua" keep to be, up to now, an important force in the development of literature as an art.

One of keywords of Ong's theory is psychodynamics of orality. It consists of several features orality exemplifies contrarily to writing forms of language. All of these features influence the language of a literary text in various aspects, as its style, composition, and presented world.

According to Walter Ong oral language

1. prefers parataxis over hypotaxis,

2. uses willingly redundant, aggregative constructions as traditional epithets.

3. In general redundancy in form of syntactic parallelism or any other type of amplification, is a dominant of the style of oral message, as a way to save information from possible errors to occur during the process of communication.

All the three above mentioned features of orality, namely, parataxis, traditional epithets, and amplification - can be easily expressed in the terms of school rhetoric and poetics, and applied to analyze every literary work, even the lately published bestseller. The remark that the language of contemporary literature got to colloquial register coincides with the announce of coming of the second orality in electronic media.

4. Oral language is close to the human lifeworld, what Ong understands somehow negatively as incapacity of oral language to work as a neutral vehicle of information as for instance in a such data structure as a list. In Homer's catalogue of the ships names of Greek leaders appear always in the context of their deeds. In other words, orality prefers situation rather than abstract.

This remark gets deeply into the essence of literature, whose one of the constitutive ingredients would be a story as opposite to abstract enumerations of ideas typical for philosophical or scientific text. As Jose Ortega y Gasset shows, this reluctance of literary language to abstract notions appears especially strongly in modern novel, where instead of creating of a character by a description, by an enumeration of its personal traits, a narrator tends to show him in action so as to let a reader by himself to reconstruct

psychology of the character. "There is no point in saying what is a character like, we need to see him with our own eyes."[2] Ong is quoting the results of researches of Aleksandr Luria, who showed that illiterates didn't see a circle drawn on a paper, but rather a sun, a clock, or a bucket.

5. Orality is toned agonistically. Writing and reading isolates a human being from the human society, while orality always necessitates some human interaction and therefore provides a ground for competitive behavior.

No need to convince anyone that since the competition of classical Greek tragedians up to contemporary slam poetry agon is a crucial activity of literary life. This social phenomenon influences internal construction of literary work, which is abundant with "enthusiastic descriptions of physical violence", as are some chapters of Homer's Illiad.

6. Oral message is "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced"

Still, subjective perspective seems to be one of the constitutive traits of fictional literature, which introduces such a being as fictional narrator, which doesn't exist in philosophical or scientific text.

7. Natural plot type in oral story is episodic.

Ong observes that oral plot doesn't fit to classic Gustav Freytag pyramide[3] with exposition, climax and conclusion. Novels as Don Quixote, Tom Jones, The Pickwick Papers to a relatively high extent belong to the world of orality, whereas Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" with its teleological construction wouldn't be possible without writing, and "The Gold-Bug" — without printing.

## *Conclusions*

Research on technology, not necessarily preceded by an adjective "new", in the context of literature seems to open numerous new perspectives for the future, like possible but still not existing anthropology of electronic word that could examine the influence of printing and its residua in electronic text.

Another tempting topic would be risking a hypothesis that the very language can be seen

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2   J. Ortega y Gasset, Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje, przeł. P. Niklewicz, Warszawa 1980, p. 328.
3   Gustav Freytag, Die Technik des Dramas, Bearbeitete Neuausgabe, Autorenhaus Verlag, Berlin 2003

as a technology, what could perhaps shed a new light on contemporary theories of nationalism and colonialism.

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