

## Introduction: Orality and Literacy

James Emmott and Tom F. Wright

2012 marked the thirtieth anniversary of Walter Ong's influential *Orality and Literacy*.<sup>1</sup> The orality–literacy dyad crystallized by the book has remained a useful critical lens in recent examinations of the complex literary and historical relationships between voice, sound, and print cultures. In a series of events convened under the auspices of the London Nineteenth-Century Studies Seminar and the Birkbeck Forum for Nineteenth-Century Studies, twelve speakers explored a range of issues relating to the interactions between voice and text in the Anglo-American long nineteenth century: philology and acoustic nostalgia; laughter, melody, melancholia, and poetic form; the mediated materiality of print; dialect and class; oratory and radical politics; and the phonetic and phonographic dimensions of literary culture. In assembling the contributions for this special issue, we have retained the borrowed title, while allowing ourselves and our authors to be guided by a broader intellectual compass.

The opening article by Sandra Gustafson helps to establish these themes, with an evaluation of the place of Ong and *Orality and Literacy* within a 'capacious methodology' that has characterized a number of important scholarly reappraisals of the nineteenth-century convergence of orality and oral genres with the rise of literacy and the expansion of printed forms of communication. Gustafson's introductory reflections segue into a consideration of the relations between political speech and the form of the novel, both 'mass genres' which competed for attention as the century proceeded. Focusing particular attention on Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn* (1869) and Henry Adams's *Democracy* (1880), she presents a model of literary history that reorientates critical attention to the role of vocal expression in what she has previously termed the 'emerging media' resultant from the interplay and convergence of oral and literate forms.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). A thirtieth anniversary edition was issued with additional chapters by John Hartley (London: Routledge, 2012).

The following two articles focus their interest on one of the most significant instantiations of emerging media in the nineteenth century, the phonograph. In ‘Thomas Edison’s Poetry Machine’, Matthew Rubery proposes that the innovative mechanical and performative experiments that accompanied the creation of the first replayable spoken word recordings make 1878 ‘a more important year to the history of literature than has yet been recognized’. Drawing on accounts of demonstrations in which spoken words were radically disassembled, rewound, and superimposed, and in a series of readings of poems that were regularly chosen for phonographic recital (including Tennyson and Poe), Rubery argues that the phonograph enabled audiences to ‘discern new forms of meaning, pleasure, and pathos in even the most well-known material’, leading to ‘new ways of thinking about verse as well as voice’. Will Abberley’s article focuses on how analogies of voice recording found purchase in conceptualizations of identity and heredity. “‘His father’s voice’: Phonographs and Heredity in the Fiction of Samuel Butler’ explores the connections between nineteenth-century discussions of the recording and reproduction of sound and views of inheritance in which children continually echo their parents, and ancestral speech persists through the passing on of social discourse. As Abberley shows, Butler’s writing — including *The Way of All Flesh*, written (between 1873 and 1884) in the age of the phonograph — addressed these anxieties by linking reflections on family dynamics with metaphors drawn from this new technology, figuring heredity as inscription and language as a form of organic memory. In tracing Butler’s articulations of these ideas, Abberley offers a distinctive literary-cultural perspective on the ‘uncanny ontological disturbances’ wrought by vocal reproduction.

In ‘Spoken Word and Printed Page: G. W. M. Reynolds and “The Charing-Cross Revolution”, 1848’, Mary Shannon considers the intricate role that oratory can play in the pages of fiction. In his famous ‘penny dreadful’, *The Mysteries of London* (1844–48), Reynolds drew upon a host of older oral forms such as ballads, chapbooks, storytelling, sermons, and pulpit declarations. The result was a text suffused with radical speech and steeped in the techniques and aesthetics of public oratory, establishing a powerful link between the space of the London street and that of the printed page. It forged a genre, Shannon argues, whose power lay in the potential that imagined readers and interpolated listeners might now become real protestors. By focusing on these cross-fertilizations of journalism and fiction, voice and text, street and page, Shannon’s article sheds new light on some of the formal and ideological tensions of mid-century

popular fiction and its relation to the performative rituals of radical speech-making. Eliza Cubitt takes up a related set of concerns in showing how the voices of gossip defined and defied boundaries in social constructions of space and neighbourhood in the late-Victorian East End. Focusing on the uses of gossip in forging new forms of authorial objectivity in the writing of Arthur Morrison and W. Somerset Maugham, “‘The Screaming Streets’: Voice and the Spaces of Gossip in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *Liza of Lambeth* (1897)’ maps the powers of communal orality in these representations of the ‘places of strange order’ that constituted the working-class streets of London at the end of the century.

In the closing article of the collection, the crucial role of oratory in nineteenth-century nation-building again comes to the fore in the pre-Famine Ireland of Daniel O’Connell’s legendary ‘monster meetings’, when vast sections of an entire population heard the same voice speak. In “‘The shouts of vanished crowds’: Literacy, Orality, and Popular Politics in the Campaign to Repeal the Act of Union in Ireland, 1840–1848’, Huston Gilmore examines the manner in which this world of mass orality was fused with cultures of reading through the dissemination of print materials in dedicated reading rooms. While recent postcolonial scholarship has explored the generalized importance of orality for Irish modernity, Gilmore’s social history provides a focused narrative that shifts attention to the ‘silence’ of the rural poor, and ‘the gulf between the nationalism brokered by urban elites and the concerns of those living in a rural economy in crisis’, arguing for the production and recitation of speech texts as practices that simultaneously lay bare subtle social hierarchies, and suggest the mutual limitations of voice and text as means of political mobilization.