

Journal of Early Modern Studies, n. 7 (2018), pp. 25-40
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/JEMS-2279-7149-22836>

Storytelling, Memory, Theatre

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Abstract

In the history of Western civilisation, the spread of writing, followed by the book, obviously did not entirely replace oral culture and communication, but led to the development of a dialectic relationship, especially in the sense that memory underwent a gradual shift away from the human mind, where it tended to limit itself to recalling necessary notions and facts stored in documents, books, and, more recently, in audiovisual recordings and electronic databases. The article foregrounds the most important aspects of this process by means of a series of especially significant examples in the relationship between words and other means of expression and communication by the human body.

Keywords: *Memory, Non-verbal Communication, Reading, Reciting, Recording*

In the mid-fourth century BCE, the Athenian orator Lycurgus, who at the time was invested with wide-ranging powers, occupying a position comparable to a modern economics minister, but especially thanks to his moral and political prestige, had a measure approved providing for the setting up of bronze statues of the three great fifth-century tragedians – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – in the Theatre of Dionysus (which had recently been rebuilt in stone). At the same time he also ordered that the authentic texts of their works be placed in the city archives so as to prevent actors from introducing additions or variations. The story is told in a text by the so-called Pseudo-Plutarch,¹ written in a vaguely mythical tone in the first century BCE, but the importance of the event did not pass unnoticed:² we could actually say that a *corpus* of ‘classical’ authors was created, their texts being fixed in a definitive edition (a critical edition?!), which should be performed to the letter – though the fact that acting could modify the meaning of the text of a play was not taken into account (something that Tommaso Salvini, the famous Italian actor, was well aware of). Nevertheless the theatrical factor remains, almost implying that the only way of publishing and transmitting these immortal texts

¹ Ps. Plutarch 1936, 400-401 (Lycurgus, 841f-842a). Molinari’s essay has been translated from Italian by John Denton.

² See Scodel 2007, with ample bibliography.



could be stage performance, ignoring the possibility that they could be written down and read, albeit at a time when books began to circulate, as, in the first instance, noted by Aristophanes.³

Almost two thousand years later, in 1623, two actors in Shakespeare's company, John Heminge and Henry Condell, published a folio edition of his complete plays – interestingly not of his poetical works, including the sonnets. This was also a case of establishing a canon *ne varietur* of a writer who had already attained 'classic' status, arguably imitating (or perhaps challenging) the attempt by Ben Jonson, who had already laid claim to this status by publishing a folio edition of his works (later the same honour was to be claimed by Beaumont e Fletcher; see Guarino 2010, 104). However, the reasons behind this move were different to, even the opposite of, those inspiring Lycurgus. Heminge and Condell, in their epistle to the reader, state that it would have been better if the author himself had been able to publish his writings, but, since destiny had decided otherwise,

we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to haue collected & publish'd them; and so to haue publish'd them, as where (before) you were abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors, that expos'd them: euen those, are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers as he conceiued them. (Shakespeare 1623, A3)

It was clearly no longer a question of protecting the text from actors' whims, nobody imagining, at the time, that it ought to be or even could be performed complete. This was demonstrated by the case of *Hamlet*, the length of which made this unlikely. It was only in the early twentieth century that the Old Vic was to stage a complete performance, ironically called 'eternity *Hamlet*' (see Lunari 1959, 70). For the time being, the problem was simply the editor's concern, i.e. the restoration of an authentic text, as written down by the author in contrast with those published illicitly, on occasion based on transcriptions produced during actual performances, or relying on the memory of disloyal actors – the well-known bad quartos. The text was no longer to be performed, but addressed a 'great variety of readers' – 'theatre' had become 'literature' (just as Aristotle had foreseen).

Therefore, plays, like all other literary works, from sonnets to novels, could be read aloud in the presence of an audience of any size, or composition:⁴

³ See the well-known line 1113 spoken by the chorus of *The Frogs*: 'Each one (of the members of the audience) has a book, and understands the clever bits'. It is worth noting that some scholars have read *bublion* rather than *biblion*, preferring 'has a papyrus', perhaps using 'papyrus' as a metonym for 'book'.

⁴ The readings put on for cigar factory workers in Cuba are of particular interest (see Manguel 1996, 110-111). While Roger Chartier (1989) refers to cases where reading aloud aimed to reinforce friendship among a group of well-educated individuals.

ladies could also entertain their guests in their drawing rooms with readings, just as they did with the (more or less enjoyable) singing or instrumental performances by their daughters. But there are some specific features, not only due to the fact that plays, since they consist of exchanges between characters, required greater skill in varying tonality and expressiveness of the voice (the Neapolitan *cantastorie* – storytellers – or *cuntastorie* – the so-called *rinaldi* – being masters of the art, together with their Sicilian colleagues; see Di Palma 1991, 41). In addition, if a public reading could be seen as an initial type of publication and test of possible acceptance, in the case of a play it could also promote it for purchase by a theatre or company of actors. Certainly, Vittorio Alfieri made use of readings of his tragedies in the Countess of Albany's and other ladies' salons to test the reactions of a small, select audience and even listen to comments as a prelude to possible changes to the text. This was also the aim of Victor Hugo, who, following the discussions caused by the publication of *Cromwell* and its Preface, organized a meeting of the cream of Parisian intelligentsia to read *Marion Delorme*. But Baron Taylor, at that time the manager of the Théâtre Français, also happened to be present and he forced Hugo to sell him the play forthwith (Hugo 1985, 450). As a result, Hugo's reading was no longer for the purpose of seeking the approval of the company of actors of the text, since Taylor had already performed the task, so the various parts were assigned straightaway. Reading thus became a particularly complex affair, since the author/reader would not only have to deal with rhythm, stress and tones which the actors were implicitly required to transfer to their characters, but also to do so bearing in mind the vocal qualities of individual performers, at the same time trying to capture their more or less underlying reactions.

It was therefore a very special kind of *lettura* (reading) in a way close to a *lezione* (lesson); and it might be of some interest to investigate the number and nature of the shades of meaning of the two words in Italian and other European languages deriving from the common Latin *lectio*, or separating them etymologically. But it was a *lezione* during which the pupils would have to learn, not only and not so much from the information and thoughts contained in the text being recited, as rather from the vocal melody, probably only to a limited degree imitation, of this *recita* (performance), the idea of which seems to me to be more appropriate than that of *lettura*. The two terms, in any case, are not incompatible: indeed, reading in the form of reciting, i.e. conferring expressiveness and rhythm on the words, is the rule when reading aloud (unlike the case of endophasia), although frequent suggestions to vary the tone and intensity of the voice, in order to match the content and also the character and even the audience, suggest that the temptation of monotony is always lying in wait. Thus, the reader must be an interpreter who is able not only to bring out the psychological and emotional, logical and moral content of his text, but also communicate his own emotions and judgment

(see Trelease 2013, 107): i.e. be an actor.⁵ Actors are still asked to read literary texts in various contexts, for example during a lecture where the lecturer wants to include a quotation, on which he/she feels incapable of conferring the desired emotional character, only a true actor being able to do so. We can also find ‘shows’ consisting only of reading, which can make up a series, so as to complete the reading aloud of a large-scale text such as a novel: a ‘live’ reading which could become an audiobook.⁶

Reading and reciting by heart are not so radically different. It is widely agreed that writing began as an *aide-mémoire* (see Glasser 2000, 69 ff.) though exteriorization of memory, following Plato, is arguably more appropriate. Recently, a well-known neuroscientist, Rodrigo Quian Quiroga, maintained that the human brain is not really fit for the process of memory. It is arguably for this reason that men (or characters) with remarkable memories from Pico della Mirandola to Julien Sorel have become almost legendary and the subject of memory and mnemonics has fascinated so many from Quintilian to Cicero, up to Giulio Camillo, with whom the subject was impressively sorted out at the time of the development of printing.⁷ Reading aloud and reciting by heart are not incompatible: in both cases the reciter communicates a literary text, handed down by oral tradition or learnt from a written text, which, in a relatively recent period, could be a book, often containing personal variations. There are even cases in which the story-teller recites, book in hand (the *Kings of France*), which did not stop him gesticulating and moving about on the small platform: he looked at the book when he needed to, as though it were a prompt.⁸

The most meaningful opposite is that between reciting by heart and improvisation, precisely because of their substantial uniformity, or, more exactly, their belonging to the same category of action: a pear can be compared with an apple or even water melon but not with a cupboard. This is not the place to address the theme of improvisation in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, except to recall that major scholars have denied it existed (or even that it could exist), whereas, in my view, proof of its existence is confirmed not only by many direct witnesses, but also, and above all, by documentation concerning improviser-poets and storytellers, from Machiavelli to Cristoforo Altissimo, excellently researched by Luca Degl’Innocenti (2016). That improvisation can and must consist of formulas, repetitions and quotations is obvious and does in no way undermine the fact of the matter.

⁵ See also Chartier 2001, 27, citing *La Franciade* by Ronsard.

⁶ Concerning recent readings of play texts, so-called *mise-en-espace* have been put on where the actors stood on the stage in front of lecterns. Such a ‘reading show’ was put on in 2003 by Al Pacino who called ‘Reading’ a *mise-en-espace* of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. See Molinari 2015, 180.

⁷ Apart from the classic study by Frances A. Yates (1966), see the more recent one by Lina Bolzoni (1995) and, on relations with actors, Tamburini 2015, 57 ff.

⁸ See Rajna 1878, 567. Rajna refers to a Maestro Cosimo, active in the second half of the nineteenth century.

I have always thought that speaking, especially when it takes on the character of discourse, can be seen as a ball of wool, interrupted and held together by several knots making up the move from one utterance to another. So I was pleased to find this image used by a Sicilian *cuntista* (storyteller), Salvatore Ferreri, who said to Pitrè: ‘What is a ball of thread like? When unwound on one side it continues to be unwound on the other, until it reaches the end; but in my head the end of this thread never appears, because my story has no end’.⁹ So we could conclude that the difference between reciting by heart and improvising consists of the different quality of thread: uniform in the former, different in material, colour and thickness in the latter. So that the improvisers themselves must be astonished in the face of their new motive, which, unexpectedly, makes them indignant or moves them, in any case involving them. For this reason, *ottava rima*, i.e. a rather complex metre, becomes a kind of stabilising device, at least permitting the continuity of rhythm; while making use of a visual aid such as a placard, so common with Sicilian *cuntastorie* very similar to the *teatro dei pupi* (the typical Sicilian marionette theatre; see Alberti 1977), ensured the continuity of the story, at the same time highlighting its realism (paradoxically making it resemble an illustrated book, in the double meaning of the word ‘illustrare’ – at least in Italian –: to make illustrious and explain). It should be added, in the light of these considerations of reciting/improvising storytelling, that recognition is due to the important suggestion by Derrida (1967, but also 1978) concerning writing as an elective (or symbolic?) modality of thought, which cannot be seen as a continuous flux, or the unwinding of a thread, but rather the problematic emergence and stabilisation of the word, or sign, adequate for the substance of thought itself.

Nevertheless, I should like to recall a third modality of recitation – and I ask my readers to forgive me, since the example is entirely based on memory, and is thus uncertain and cannot be verified. About forty years ago I was present at a *Maggio* (traditional May celebration-performance) held near a village in the Apennine mountains. It was thus a specifically theatrical occasion. There was a single performer (an actor or storyteller, whatever you want to call him) who recited a story mostly consisting of words of characters from the story of Renaud de Montauban (aka Rinaldo), moving around the meadow in front of no more than twenty spectators, but accompanied by a prompter who whispered in his ear, reading the words the reciter had to turn into a chant, naturally accompanying them with limited though intense gestures. It should be recalled that Maestro Cosimo mentioned by Pitrè had used a book as a prompt, but only for occasional use, for any moments of uncertainty. Here, though, prompting was permanent, the utterances being brief, their length being increased by a drawn out, monotonous chant, albeit subject to a strong rhythm, as if the storyteller wanted to confer on the

⁹ Pitrè 1884, quoted by Di Palma 1991, 51.

words that he alone could hear a kind of religious tone rather than the coherence of a story. Actually, I clearly remember that they were mostly incomprehensible, like a mass sung in Latin. Neither Alessandro D'Ancona (1891), nor Paolo Toschi (1955) refer to a similar type of *Maggio*; Toschi, however, does refer to the presence of a prompt or scroll at May in the Modena area or along the northern Tuscan coast adding that 'the audience could not see them' (90-91).¹⁰ In the present case, however, this presence must be seen as decisive for the emotional and ritual meaning of the show: the prompt is, though not a divine voice, at least that of inspiration or tradition.

Oral (or it is perhaps better to use the more general term 'unwritten') communication does not only involve vocality. We have already recalled the frequent requests to vary rhythm and tone, as well as setting up a visual link with the audience, as though speaker and audience should look at each other. The reciter and public speaker can, or rather should support their words with gestures and miming, when addressing the listener-spectator. Quintilian, on the basis of a remark by Cicero, had devoted almost half of the eleventh book of his *Institutio oratoria* to *actio*, i.e. gesture and mime separate from *pronunciatio*. Two thousand years later, a learned writer dealing with many different subjects, who was also arguably the first professor of constitutional law, Giuseppe Compagnoni, went so far as to maintain that facial mime and hand gestures are a prelude to the meaning of the words to be read or recited.¹¹

Paradoxically, oral communication (being unwritten) can turn into visual communication, entrusted to gestures and mime, usually referred to as the 'language of gestures' such as sign language for the deaf, though anthropologists have discovered something similar among native Americans, for whom sign language was a kind of lingua franca enabling them to overcome innumerable oral linguistic barriers (see Washburn 1975). In both cases we are dealing with true languages, in which the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary, as in spoken varieties, though there is no recourse to syllabic articulation, thus being closer to pictography. This does not happen in the case of mime and gesture accompanying spoken discourse, albeit originating in a kind of zero grade consisting, on the one hand, of what we could call 'gestural silence' and, on the other, of criticized monotonous diction. It has been argued that gesture could be considered a kind of 'natural' and therefore universal expression. However, gestures normally coincide with words, or they are superimposed over them, without necessarily confirming them, even contradicting them as Quintilian had already observed.

¹⁰ The presence of a prompter who also appears to act as the 'director', is also recorded in the case of medieval mystery plays by Jean Fouquet's well known miniature, *The Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia*, in the *Livre d'heures* of Étienne Chevalier, Cluny, Musée Condé.

¹¹ 'Movement of facial features and gestures ... appearing to those spoken to by means of the eyes, touch the soul before they reach the ears' (Compagnoni 1827, 269).

But the history of the theatre includes a very well known, extraordinary case, which was destined not to remain without a sequel, in which word and gesture (or, more exactly, word and mime) came from different sources – as is the case with marionette theatre and the specific form it takes in Sicily, where vocal expressiveness must have a strong impact, or, with an even greater one, in the theatre of shadows common in China, Turkey and, especially, Bali (*wayang-kulit*) – although in these cases this dissociation is not clearly perceived by spectators.

This probably originated in the well-known anecdote in Livy concerning an actor called Livius Andronicus, who, owing to a hoarse voice, is supposed to have asked another actor to recite (in this case chant) in his place, while he continued to mime (dancing) his part.¹² This was taken up by the English Dominican friar Nicholaus Trevet, a major scholar and editor of Seneca, the anecdote being turned into an imaginary picture of theatre and shows in ancient Rome. In Trevet's words:

Et nota quod tragedie et comedie solebant in theatro hoc modo recitari: theatrum erat area semicircularis, in cuius medio erat parva domuncula, que scena dicebatur, in qua erat pulpitem super quod poeta carmina pronunciabat; extra vero erant mimi, qui carminum pronunciationem gestu corporis effigiabant per adaptationem ad quemlibet ex cuius persona loquebatur. (Trevet 1954, 5)¹³

However imaginary, this description of ancient Roman theatre immediately appeared credible, to the extent of being reproduced almost literally by Boccaccio (in a letter to Carlo Durazzo) and by Pietro Alighieri (1978) and being illustrated in the miniatures appearing in the frontispieces of *Terence des ducs* and *Terence du duc de Berry*,¹⁴ as well as in a miniature in a French translation of Saint Augustine's *City of God* (*De Civitate Dei; Cité de Dieu*);¹⁵ it remained the best known view of an ancient theatre at least up to Flavio Biondo's archaeological research and the rediscovery of Vitruvius. It actually did represent one basic element of historical truth in the fortune of 'pantomime' in the age of Augustus.

It is not always easy to have a clear idea of how and by what means mime and gesture joined or replaced words: as already mentioned, the richest source of information concerns storytellers, especially those from Sicily and Naples. But the late medieval jesters and their Renaissance heirs such as Zoppino (see Rospocher 2014) were not, or at least not mainly, storytellers (see Zumthor

¹² Livy 1924, 362-363 (*Ab urbe condita*, VII, ii, 8-10).

¹³ 'You should know that tragedies and comedies were acted as follows: the theatre was semi-circular, at the centre of which there was a booth called *scena* containing a pulpit from which the poet recited his lines; the mimes were outside, acting the words with gestures associating them with the character concerned'.

¹⁴ Held by the Bibliothèque Nationale and Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal in Paris.

¹⁵ Philadelphia, Museum of Art. On the whole question, see Pietrini 2001 and 2011.

1987, 60-63); they could act as a kind of ‘journalist’, on the one hand telling the news items they had heard or invented during their journeys, but also engaging in political or social controversy, just like Zoppino; or acting their own sufferings. Two examples, chronologically very far apart, are good illustrations: the case of the jester named Matazone da Caligano (see Molinari 1972), and that of Nicolò Campani, aka Strascino da Siena, akin to the craftsmen who were amateur comic actors known as ‘pre-Rozzi’ (Pieri 2010, 183-251).

Detto dei villani (or, more precisely ‘ragionamento’ – reasoning – *raxone*) by Matazone, which could date back to the end of the thirteenth century, begins with an address to the listeners, often seen as evidence of oral recitation, followed by a more uncommon self-presentation by the author, which classifies it as half way between the two above-mentioned types, continuing in a quasi-dramatic form with the introduction of three characters speaking to each other. This implies that the reciter may have not only varied his tone of voice but also employed mime and gestures communicating the varied social status of the characters: an old peasant woman, as well as the farmer and the lord. Here it is worth recalling the epitaph of the earliest mime Vitalis – ‘Fingebam vultus, habitus ac verba loquentum / ut plures uno crederes ore loqui’¹⁶ – which shows that interpretation of characters consisting of mime and gesture as well as the voice was part of the jesters’ skills. It could also be the case that, in a way, the reciter could show his affection for and solidarity with one or other of the characters – almost like a Brechtian actor, though he was personally involved in the discussion since he confessed that he was also of peasant origin, even if he had repudiated this fact. All this contrasts with the metre consisting of seven-syllable rhyming couplets, which recall the monotonous rhythm of a nursery rhyme. This could, however, have enlivened the presence of the speaker (especially if he coincided or could be identified with the author) characterised by a possibly painful irony, or self-deprecating humour, due to the ambiguity of his position as a peasant who had become a singer of the marvellous virtues of his master, addressing an equally noble audience of ‘seignor e cavalier’. This could have endowed this monotonous rhythm with the almost dreamlike quality of a fairy tale, or even a love song, underpinned or challenged by attitude and gesture.

The *Lament* is a specific literary genre, the oldest ancestor of which could be identified in the biblical monologue in which Job curses the day he was born. In the words of Paul Zumthor: ‘Au XII^e siècle, le *planctus* est devenu un genre noble’ (1987, 53). Naturally, several varieties can be singled out – from the lament attributed to a character in a narrative context, like that of Achilles

¹⁶ ‘I imitated the faces, gestures and speech of the characters and it could be believed that many spoke by means of a single mouth’. Noted by Reich 1903, 599, note 3, with reference to *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XIV, 2408, also to be found in *Latin Anthology* 487a. It is a 27-line poem originally in the basilica of S. Sebastiano, on the Via Appia in Rome, now held in the Museum in Frascati, but also to be found in an eleventh-century ms. The elegiac couplets appear to give it an early date.

to his mother Venus, after the death of Patroclus, or occupying a single poem, as in the case of Catullus' *Ariadne's Lament* set to music in Monteverdi's well known aria 'Lasciatemi morire'; or a Lament by a poet or singer concerning his love pangs, which, on occasion, can become invective, as with the sonnet by Cecco Angiolieri, 'La mia malinconia è tanta e tale' ('My melancholy is so deep and such'). The poems concerned are usually nostalgic or passionate in tone. It is easy to imagine that here diction is especially heated and moving, on occasion accompanied by intensely expressive gestures and mime, so as to attract the spectator's attention and understanding.

The subject of Strascino's lament is certainly not a love pang, on the contrary, he attacks those who cry over pain of this type, which can easily be set aside. Here the pain is much more concrete and excruciating, physical pain caused by that terrible disease which, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, had reached the dimensions of a pandemic, thus being of concern to the very listeners or readers.¹⁷

The *Lamento di quel tribulato di Strascino Campana senese* was certainly performed on various occasions, probably from 1508 (see Pieri 2010, 184), before being published by Zoppino in 1521, who is considered the *trait d'union* between public reciting and printing (Rospocher 2014, 350). The problem is that perhaps it had been at least partially written before being recited. The tale of the dream which allegedly convinced him to compose the 'stanzas' leaves the question an open one,¹⁸ even though it is possible, but, in my view improbable, that the initial one hundred and seventeen stanzas (i.e. the original nucleus of the *Lamento*) had been printed on loose sheets as handouts for the audience.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the metre used is *ottava rima*, which is not to be found in previous works by Campani – at least those with a dramatic structure that survive. *Ottava rima* is a kind of metre originating in the *cantari* later consecrated by the chivalrous epic, the epic poems by Pulci, Boiardo and Ariosto, but, for this very reason, often used by storytellers. It is as though Strascino had intended to present his work not as a *planctus*, but rather an *epos*, a heroic tale, even though there is no kind of narration, the work actually ending up in a confusing medley, only held together by self-pity, as though this flow of words could be a

¹⁷ Reference is obviously required to Gerolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus*, Verona, 1530. Marzia Pieri recalls several previous cases (2010, 184 note 2).

¹⁸ Strascino to the Readers 'Di modo che ... così sognando alcuna stanza, più fiato rivoltata, talmente mi si fisse in la memoria, che da poi ricordandomene, di scriverla mi disposi. E, sì come avvenir suole che l'un verso l'altro tira, a tal cagione ho fatte più stanze oltre certe che già ne feci quando effettivamente da ditto male percosso e agitato mi trovava' ('So that, ... dreaming some stanzas, I did my best to memorise them preparing to write them down. And as one line led on to another, in this way I created more stanzas in addition to others when I was smitten by this illness and felt most nervous'). The original Italian has the generic 'feci' (created) which could refer either to composing from memory or writing (see Pieri 2010, 197-198).

source of comfort. As a consequence, diction will have found the appropriate accent in sorrowful pain, albeit with all the possible deviations from hiccoughs to gasping pleas, rebellious cries and profanities, on occasion attenuated by unsuccessful attempts at reasoning or at least resigning oneself. From the viewpoint of gesture it is easier to think of a general lack of it, interrupted by threatening gestures with the clenched fist against God, immediately followed by submission of defeat, while his disfigured mask spoke for itself, without the chance of making changes. I wonder whether this interpreter of himself may have recited standing up, presenting himself as a narrator, or else lying down in a kind of realistic version of something that is not a story, but present truth.

However evidently hypothetical, these attempts at visualising the speaker's (or reader's) gesture, attitude and miming and describing the sound of his voice, are necessary because the difference between speaking and reading out loud in public and private consists of the total material presence of the speaker. Obviously, a daughter reading to her sick father to help him forget the slow passing of time, or a mother telling her child a story before he falls asleep will usually reduce gesture and mime to zero, but cannot ignore expressiveness and tone of voice – and this is deliberate, though without interpretative aims, on occasion using a sing-song tone to get the child to fall asleep.

It is actually not always true that speaking or reciting in public requires visibility or even the physical presence of the speaker or actor. Pietro Aretino recalls that Cimador, the son of the actor/clown Zuan Polo Liompardi, 'contrafacea una brigata di voci' ('imitated a whole troop of voices') from behind a door – or perhaps a curtain (Aretino 1980, 46). Thus the 'show' consisted of a voice, though one can imagine that the spectators gazed at that curtain, as though they were awaiting the appearance of those characters who sounded like a large group but were only a single individual. The fact that the spectators were subsequently invited to see a 'real' play (which did not actually take place) is not relevant.

These performances consisting entirely of sound were in a way not only the equivalent of a dumb-show (called *pantomima* in Italian, which does not correspond to the usual meaning of the English 'pantomime') but also of those *tableaux vivants* called *mystères sans parler ni signer* (i.e. without words or movements) present in late-medieval France, but also fashionable between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as recorded by Goethe in *Wahlverwandtschaften*, as well as posing or 'attitudes' like those of Lady Hamilton reproducing the figures on ancient vases in her husband's collection while he was British ambassador to the court of Naples.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lady Hamilton's poses can be seen in several paintings by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, on whom, see, among others, Fraser 2012.

In these cases theatre overtly tends to identify itself with visual art,²⁰ and thus with writing, if in this we follow Plato, whose well-known argument (*Phaedrus* 275 d-e) I find most intriguing, especially because, while writing is called *graphè*, a few lines further on it is called *logos* (actually *logoi*, in the plural), of which the first meaning is 'word', referring to the 'written word'. Without wanting to exaggerate, the thought came to me that this interpretation could call into question the first verse of St John's Gospel: '*En archè en o logos*', 'In the beginning was the Word', which could be translated 'In the beginning was the written word', which would overturn Derrida's challenging argument, making Christianity, as well as Judaism, a religion of the book²¹ – even though Jesus actually never wrote down a single line.

However, identification with visual art does not only imply doing without the word, as in the case of dumb-shows but also any kind of narration, i.e. the time dimension, which remains entirely within the observer's gaze: even though, at a certain point, the show has to stop, though its length is entirely arbitrary.

Since the source of the voice is not visible (though it can be known), it is reduced to pure time, thus losing the tangible matter characterising certain kinds of visual art, especially sculpture. There is an anecdote about Rodin supposedly stroking the ancient statues in the Louvre from which he drew inspiration. This is true of the muezzin's chant calling the faithful to prayer: precisely because the source is invisible, can his voice be perceived as coming from Heaven – just like the very voice of God. In such cases one can readily agree with Marshall McLuhan: the medium really is the message (or massage?).²²

The muezzin's voice could easily be recorded – and I imagine that this can actually be the case. This leads into a completely new question, albeit an eye-opening one. From the time radio and TV have become mere household appliances, also present in many public places, such as bars, cafés, and restaurants, we are used to hearing voices and music (aka Muzak), as well as seeing people and events, though in most cases we cannot be sure whether they are actually present at the time we see or hear them or whether they have been recorded more or less recently. Furthermore, we are able to record a particular broadcast and thus move to the present something that we know took place in the past, with a kind of suspension of disbelief. This also means that we need not ask ourselves who originally spoke the words we are listening to. Thus, a medieval audience was not interested in knowing whether a specific song or lover's lament they were listening to had been composed by the jester reciting it or was the work of some

²⁰ Ragghianti 1952. Here, as he had done in an earlier essay, Ragghianti identifies also theatre with visual arts.

²¹ Actually Derrida wrote, quoting Jabès, 'race issue du livre' ('people born of the book'; 1967, 99).

²² McLuhan and Fiore, 1967. The original title was *The Medium is the Massage*, probably owing to a typesetter's error, though McLuhan approved, because of the suggestion of the possible physical impact of the medium on the receiver.

troubadour. Words always belong to their speakers, which dashed any hope on the part of Giraut Riquier of gaining recognition of his supremacy and 'author's rights' as set out in his well-known petition (see Bertolucci Pizzorusso 1966).

A conclusion of this type, however, could ignore or neglect a concept that is as decisive as it is ambiguous: that of interpreter and interpretation. It is ambiguous, because in Latin it could already waver between the meaning of mediator and that of presenter/commentator, i.e. he/she who explains, illustrates or even translates – and here it is worth recalling that the Greek word *hupokritès*, usually understood as meaning 'actor' has been translated as 'interpreter' (Zucchelli 1963), but also decisive inasmuch as it sets up a link between a text, either oral or written, and he who transmits it or simply reads it privately or even recalls it – as if this link were necessarily *an sich*, of an interpretative nature. Many actors lay claim to the role of 'interpreter', even after the modern and contemporary avant-garde had denied this, limiting the play text as a mere theme, when not a simple pretext. This conflict was lucidly healed by Piero Gobetti, stating that an actor interprets a text just as the author (the poet) interprets nature (1974).

It is obvious that cinema audiences watch a recorded performance and that TV and the web have caused the splitting up and privatisation of this audience, with some evident exceptions, like a football match shown in the open air on a wide screen. But this has contributed to highlighting the contrast between recorded and live shows, allowing live sport and maxi rock concerts to survive, as well as even theatre and opera, despite the prohibitive expense involved. I wonder what the role of this contrast – which preserves the character of an event for a live show, while it is possible, though problematic, to confer that of monument on a recorded one²³ – was for the recent, though perhaps short-lived, fashion of the new *lecturae Dantis*,²⁴ outside the elitist academic context in public squares before a large, mixed audience, by celebrities like Vittorio Sermonti and Roberto Benigni. These readings were also commentaries, though of a predominantly spectacular nature, especially in the case of Benigni, who accompanied a varied diction interrupted by extremely expressive mime, also capable of taking on the role of commentary, as well as interpretation, i.e. two different interpretative modalities. Naturally, these readings were recorded, thus becoming documents, since they were records of an event as well as being monuments. 'The Latin word *monumentum* should be linked to the Indo-European root *men*, which expresses one of the fundamental functions of the mind (*mens*), i.e. memory (*memini*)' (Le Goff 1978, 38): thus recordings become part of the great heritage of memory removed from the human mind, starting with writing to reach fulfillment in the book. This route seems to

²³ On the event-monument contrast see Dupont 1994, quoted in Chartier 2001, 16-17, note 2.

²⁴ Started by a group of 'famous' Italian actors, who, in 1865, on the occasion of a Dante centenary, recited some cantos of the *Divine Comedy* at the Pagliano Theatre in Florence, accompanied by a series of *tableaux vivants*. See Salvini 1895, 221.

me to be illustrated in a way by the fact that in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as in several tragedies, tablets are mentioned (*beltos*), while books (*biblios/bublios*) only appear, as already mentioned, from Aristophanes onwards.

About twenty years ago, a new product called the audiobook was launched and became popular, especially in Germany, but has also spread to other countries, including Italy, where it is marketed with a striking slogan: 'read it with your eyes shut', which sums up its advantages. The audiobook can be used on all those occasions when it is difficult or impossible to use the hands or eyes, such as when driving, or simply when you feel like relaxing, with your eyes shut, as is the case with music. It is especially useful in cases of immobility, as a result of serious illnesses affecting the muscles like ALS. The audiobook can take the place of a kind reader entertaining or comforting the aged or ill people. I wonder if it could become part of the custom typical of Protestant families in which the *pater familias* read passages from the Bible to the family often sitting at the dinner table.

The audiobook is obviously a recording of the voices of one or more readers. On occasion it could be the author him/herself and here one is tempted to believe that it is a case of authentic interpretation. This is naturally not so, for the simple reason that there is no such thing as an 'authentic' interpretation (in the words of Dante) 'per la contraddizion che nol consente' ('Because of the contradiction that consents not'). It is the paradox of all reading out loud: without going as far as Chartier, who believes that the very material quality of a book and printers' options can influence the reader, one could ask oneself if Oronte in *The Misanthrope* was really such a bad poet, or if a better diction might have protected his sonnet from the criticism of Alceste. The conclusion might well be that the only case of a text and its transmission identifying with each other is that of improvisation, even though with a new paradox one can only use the word 'text'²⁵ after the improvised stretch of speech has been registered in the *reportationes* whose purpose was to fix in writing and thus possibly communicate in print the improvisations of storytellers like Altissimo or the political 'articles' by Zoppino. The fact that other unauthorised *reportationes*, a real case of theft, even though not illegal, contributed to the circulation, albeit in a distorted form, of the works of Shakespeare, is a different problem, concerning authenticity, rather than interpretation, of the texts, as shown by the recent re-evaluation of the bad quartos, often based on the prejudice that the theatre text is always written to be acted and not read (see Ioppolo 1991 and Love 1993);²⁶ while the same

²⁵ According to Emiliy Michelson (2014), writing is no match for diction, but fixes the authentic text.

²⁶ An ancient prejudice which Chartier (2001, 60) attributes also to John Marston who, in the address to the readers of his *Poetaster* (1606) affirms that comedies are written to be played and not to be read.

could be said about chivalric romances from the *Reali di Francia* to *Orlando furioso* and all oral 'literature' (Ong 2002).²⁷

Some of the essays collected in this volume go beyond the century that saw the beginning of the Modern Era in Italy, that magic century we are used to identifying with the Renaissance, but which also saw the swift spread of printing with the related privatisation of reading which got off to a difficult start in the thirteenth century with the closure of the monastic *scriptoria* and the transfer of their activities to private craftsmen (see Alessio 1990). In particular, the essay by Roberta Mullini examines a handbook for 'reading and reciting' written by a famous English-Irish actor (or rather actor/director), Thomas Sheridan, active in the second half of the eighteenth century. This makes the link between theatre, reading aloud and reciting from memory or improvising explicit. The eighteenth century is also dealt with by Antonella Giordano, who writes of a number of women who turned improvising into a new professional skill, admittedly already practised by men, who, in a way, had preceded the success of the writing profession favoured by the invention of printing (see Di Filippo Bareggi 1988). Teresa Megale deals with the rise of improvising preachers in the streets of seventeenth-century Naples, recalling that, from the time of Savonarola, treatises on the art of preaching had been published: another case of a kind of new profession. Of the three remaining contributions, the one by Riccardo Bruscaagli examines a poem on the discovery of the Canary Islands (dating from the late fifteenth century) written by the learned bishop Giuliano Dati, clearly to be recited. Christopher Geekie deals with the clashes between the supporters of Ariosto and those of Tasso, not so much on their literary value as the sound, as it were, of their verse. Luca Degl'Innocenti foregrounds the fact that many chivalric poems continued to be written and printed but also recited and, on occasion, improvised throughout the Renaissance, continuing to be popular with the lower orders but also the educated upper classes.

The purpose of this Introduction has been to frame, however roughly, a detailed picture over a long period of time and a large area of a history involving communication, orality, writing, theatre, the book and memory, since 'the book, before becoming the inexorably victorious substitute and enemy of the techniques of memory, becomes their mirror and instrument'.²⁸ I have tried to keep a difficult balance between those nostalgic for oral poetry, like Paul Zumthor, and the prophets of writing like Jacques Derrida.

I apologise for emphasizing the theme of the theatre, due to my limited competence, but I remember that someone said that the invention of printing would diminish the 'theatricality' of social life – nowadays replaced by frantic exhibitionism of the social networks.

²⁷ The essay by Ong *Orality and Literacy* (2002), goes on from Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (1971).

²⁸ See Bolzoni 1997, 19. Among the many histories of the book and of reading, I should like to single out the one by Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (1996).

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