
THE SPELLING EYE AND THE LISTENING EAR: ORAL POETICS AND NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

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Abstract:

Concepts such as orality, media criticism, manuscript culture, oral reading and performance have been introduced to New Testament scholarship since the 1980s, but their impact on and contribution to mainstream research are still in question. A resurgent interest in these socio-cultural notions is raising fundamental questions about approaches to and conclusions about early Christian texts. Some of the implications and possibilities of these developments are reviewed and briefly illustrated. Rather than emphasising another method or 'criticism' that could be 'added' to the repertoire of biblical scholarship, it is proposed that a multifaceted conceptualising of 'speaking-hearing-remembering', an 'oral poetics', inform NT scholarship.

Key Words: Reading Practices; Ancient Literacy; Hermeneutics; Orality; Performance Criticism; Verbal Art; Poetics; Oral Traditional Literature

Introduction

For the past three decades some New Testament scholars have been arguing for a reorientation in our discipline, calling for a more comprehensive approach to the NT texts; an approach informed by orality studies as practised by human and social sciences (e.g., Boomershine 1987a; 1987b; Kelber, 1994; 2014; Maxey, 2009a) which is in dialogue with cognition studies and memory research (e.g. Czachesz, 2007; DeConick, 2008). In this endeavour, some researchers point to the results of folklore studies and to the investigations in historical sociology and the anthropology of social and religious movements in pre-industrial cultures (such as Yaghjian, 1996; Hearon, 2004; Draper, 1999; 2003). Others emphasise the insights gained by scholars working in disciplines with similar historical interests who have adopted theories and methods from performance studies, the ethnography of communication and oral historians (Rhoads, 2010; Botha, 2012; Daniels, 2013; Byrskog, 2000 – among others). As in all research trajectories, these developments were anticipated, specifically in various challenges to form criticism: Willi Marxsen¹ in the late 1950s, Erhardt Güttgemanns in 1970² and Werner Kelber in 1983 all objected to the trivialisation of the uniqueness of oral and scribal communication.

¹ Marxsen very perceptively argued for a reconsideration of the conventional *linear* model of the synoptic tradition; "the traditional material scatters into every direction" (Marxsen, 1959:17). Although his focus was on the theological integrity of the Markan text, Marxsen noted that the synoptic tradition was more diffuse than evolutionary, and that the text could not simply have arisen from oral customs.

² Willem Vorster developed insights of Güttgemanns in his *Wat is 'n evangelie?* (1981; cf. Vorster, 1982; 1983). Neither scholar was explicitly concerned with oral tradition, but focused on the problematic assumptions at play in form and tradition history.

A call to be critical and more informed about the oral aspects of early Christian traditions clearly ties these assessments together, but it is the forceful claims about the *why* and the *how* of oral tradition which provides particular relevance to this selection of work. It is not the case that New Testament scholars deny the presence of oral tradition in early Christianity; rather that there is a detectable resistance not only to participate in the extensive body of knowledge with regard to orality and informal communication when they do source and tradition criticism, but also an avoidance of engaging with the *implications* of the actualities of oral tradition and orality. Orality/oral tradition is not merely an optional feature of early Christian history (like paint on a wall), and does not refer to terms to be invoked merely to cover up difficulties with purely documentary solutions to exegetical questions. Oral tradition, oral aspects and orality are basic interpretive categories, requiring formal examination.

On the one hand, the extent of interest in orality and New Testament has reached a point at which studies reviewing a remarkable progress have become available. Particularly deserving mention in this regard is Rafael Rodríguez's *Oral tradition and the New Testament: a guide for the perplexed* (2014). In this 'state of question' Rodríguez succinctly summarises and critically analyses the what, the who, the how and the why of oral tradition scholarship with reference to New Testament studies. The work of Eric Eve, who reviews the origins of the gospel traditions as a research trajectory covering oral tradition, composition and memory (Eve, 2014; 2016), also deserves to be mentioned.

On the other hand, Kelber's analysis of contemporary biblical scholarship and why objections to cross-cultural and/or trans-historical analytical models persist, is still very relevant:

As an academic discipline, biblical scholarship is laden with centuries of received manners and mannerisms. Not infrequently it has operated in a state of culturally conditioned and/or institutionally enforced isolation. More to the point, many of its historical methods and assumptions about the functioning of biblical texts originated in perennial working relations with print versions – typographic constructs of modernity. Plainly, New Testament (and biblical) studies stand in need of a rethinking of the communications environment in which the early Jesus tradition participated (Kelber, 2009:181).

Kelber's examination remains apt because far too many scholarly studies still either ignore these critical issues or dismiss them rather briefly. Partly motivating such avoidance could be an evasion of some of the implications of orality/performance research (such as loss of a fixed 'original' text, for instance). It could also relate to the challenges of construing context and memorising texts. Whatever the case may be, investigations into orality/the performance aspects of biblical texts – and consequently the body of multi- and interdisciplinary research surrounding them – are bypassed at our peril. If history and historical understanding are important, if indeed we want to 'participate' in meaningful communication with our forebears and their historical writings, dealing with the issues pertaining to orality and oral tradition in the first-century world and early Christianity is unavoidable.

A Change in Perspective

The bottom line of the challenges proposed by this development is that the viability of a number of assumptions in conventional NT scholarship and its treatment of texts, pertaining to the transmission of tradition and the oral aspects of ancient communication, have become problematic. Since the 1920s the work of Milman Parry, and then from the mid-twentieth century Albert Lord, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Dell Hymes, Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody, and more recently Richard Bauman, John M Foley, David Olson and Jan and Aleida

Assmann have fundamentally changed how to think (or more correctly, how *not* to think) about the compositional and performative aspects of oral traditions and the texts dependent on, or interacting with, them.³ It is time to deal with research on orality and related fields in a much more comprehensive way and to do that we need a profound shift in perspective; what Dunn calls a reset in default setting (cf. Dunn, 2003).

In order to illustrate more precisely what these challenges entail and to gain a better understanding of the reasons for the shift in perspective a discussion of the exploratory work of Loubser (2007) is useful.

'Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament'

In a way, Bobby Loubser's *Oral and manuscript culture in the Bible: Studies on the media texture of the New Testament* (2007), is a signpost to a crossroad in New Testament scholarship. It provides a useful summary of some of the research that has been done with regard to oral traditions in various disciplines, and it suggests a number of interesting and useful alternative research problems. Loubser himself notes that in the light of the developments at the time of his writing, the stage is set for a 'third generation' of New Testament orality studies (Loubser, 2007:87).

He uses the term 'media criticism' to characterise the paradigm change he pleads for: "an understanding of the media culture of a society provides an indispensable window into the social and psychological dynamics in that society" (Loubser, 2007:3). An understanding of media is not only important for the interpretation of ancient texts, but also vital for understanding a culture in general as well as for cross-cultural communication. Loubser's first two chapters summarise studies dealing with media and biblical traditions, and he connects these with some discussions of communication theory. He puts heavy emphasis on 'medium'; medium is a critical aspect of a message, for it is the configuration of physical elements (including orality and aurality), determined by the technology of communication, that *mediates* the coherent exchange of information. The medium is the configuration of vectors, inclusive of such things as script, voice, memory, social contexts, and format (e.g., scrolls, codices), that are operative in the storage, retrieval, and utilisation of information.

The second chapter constitutes the heart of Loubser's book, as it situates discussion of media approaches within scholarship, as well as evaluates methodology in biblical research. In order to navigate one's way among the proliferation of methods in biblical scholarship, but also in order to be able to reflect on one's preferences, some 'general theory' is necessary (Loubser, 2007:23-25). To this end, Loubser delves into systems theory (or, as he prefers to call it, a 'systems approach'; 2007:24). A system is a set of elements related to one another in such a way that it maintains or supports regulated processes (Loubser, 2007:26), therefore communication (or rather, communication *events*) should be analysed as a systems process involving senders and receivers. The purpose of the system is transmission of information, with various feedback loops that permit the adjustment of the message to the audience. "Communication systems are part of social systems in which live people participate" (Loubser, 2007:31). One implication of a systems approach is that several methods for biblical interpretation, including social-scientific study, textual criticism, reception studies,

³ Of course, issues can be raised about the individual contributions of each of these scholars. The point is the *accumulated* contribution in historical linguistics, anthropology, social history, communication studies, classics, cultural studies and literary criticism: Bauman, 2013; McCarthy, 2007; Niles, 2013; Olson, 2009; Olson & Cole, 2006

rhetorical analysis and even, according to Loubser, dogmatic hermeneutics (Loubser, 2007:51-53), are to be incorporated.

The written text that biblical scholarship tends to take as its exclusive focus is “just one aspect” of more encompassing communication systems. Texts (the material objects) ought not to be identified with the total event of communication; rather, they are active components within a system of communication, which in turn is part of a larger social system, forming the physical and visible substratum of the actual message. In addition to its purely conceptual elements, which have tended to be central to scholarly analysis, a message makes implicit and explicit reference to numerous linguistic and cultural codes (or social conventions) such as genre and canon (Loubser, 2007:33-34). Medium is another critical aspect of the message, for it is the configuration of physical elements (including orality and aurality), determined by the technology of communication, that *mediates* the coherent exchange of information. The ‘oral-aural medium’ is basic to human communication, but invariably ‘augmented’ by other media (Loubser, 2007:35). Media carry various properties that regulate the production, format, distribution and reception of messages. Just think of how media regulate distanciation (e.g., writing in contrast to conversation – Loubser, 2007:41). “Knowledge of the general media culture ... provide us with important clues as to the stylistic forms, conceptual textures and themes communicated, it can inform us about the senders and receivers, why they used certain strategies, and the world they lived in” (Loubser, 2007:47).

In the rest of his book Loubser suggests some ways for studying the ‘media texture’ of NT texts (mainly Pauline material and the Gospel of John). His first instance is a convincing exercise in an acoustic mapping of Luke 9:51-56 (Loubser, 2007:75-83). He shows that here Luke retains an oral substratum (effaced in translations that approach the text in wholly literary terms) that requires oral activation from its base in the written Gospel medium.

Likewise, the cognitive centrality of verbal (oral/aural) memory determines the doctrine of the Spirit’s presence in the Johannine literature as the expression of the oral focus upon the immediate presence of the word (Loubser, 2007:121-132). Loubser also attempts to find contemporary analogies for oral theologies in the innovative Christologies of presence prominent in some African indigenous churches (2007:145-151).

While the cultural contexts for biblical texts have long moved away from the almost exclusive orality of traditional societies, writing in antiquity retained purposes of oral enactment as well as being an external prop for memory. Conventional scholarship, Loubser points out again and again, is notoriously deficient in media awareness, and tends to project modern understandings of media dynamics – especially notions of individual, solitary authors and readers – upon the ancient messages embodied in the biblical texts.⁴ In Greco-Roman times, the boundaries of the written text were indistinct, opening out to the wider oral-traditional register. Loubser (2007:72) questions whether we can rightly assume the existence of a “self-conscious literate identity” behind each of the texts of the New Testament. New Testament writings do not reflect homogeneous compositions, but the vocabularies and styles of a number of individuals.

In other words, suggests Loubser, ancient texts should be seen as team products. This ‘team’ creating the text also includes the delivery and presentation of the text. Hence, modern depictions of ‘reading’ the New Testament texts must be inadequate; a more appropriate visualisation of what ancient reading entails would be ‘performance’ (Loubser, 2007:138). In

⁴ The challenge of anachronistic and ethnocentric depictions of ancient communication can hardly be overemphasised: Botha, 2009; 2012:62-132; Loubser, 2007:168-178.

many ways this is a refinement of a longstanding interpretation of an aspect of Paul's letters (Botha, 1993; Dahl, 1977:79; Doty, 1973:75-76; Hester, 1986:387-389; Funk, 1966; Lategan, 1988:416; Malherbe, 1986:68; Roller, 1933:16-23; White, 1986:19; see the excellent review by Oestreich, 2016:7-40).

Following from this, Loubser notes that the 'author' of a New Testament text is present with the audience when the text is 'read'. In Paul's letters reference to 'seeing' Jesus Christ (Gal. 3.1) should be understood more literally than is usual: the gestures of the reader make visible parts of the meaning/message. It is not a Pauline gospel, but a Pauline *Christology* being contextualised (Loubser, 2007:99). Loubser goes on to argue that Paul's internalising, his "in Christ/Christ in us" theology, is the expression of an oral mentality, more precisely, of the cognitive centrality of oral memory that was a key component of ancient communication.

A number of main points raised by Loubser's work can be summarised as follows:

- In antiquity, oral contextualisation was key to the emergence *and* transmission of a written composition.
- The search for an 'original text' of any New Testament writing becomes improbable (Loubser, 2007:71).
- The search for the historical Jesus requires a methodological rethink – in Loubser's (2007:7) words, the search has acquired 'surrealistic proportions' – as the 'oral origins' of the gospel traditions give different answers to the questions driving the search.
- The identification of 'layers' in the letters of Paul is futile. Rather than (somewhat inept) editing, the inconsistencies, gaps and verbal conflicts characterising these writings are due to the 'oral origins' of such writings (Loubser, 2007:97). The irregularities and breaks in Pauline and Gospel texts can "to a considerable extent at least" be ascribed to the medium of communication (Loubser, 2007:111).

Loubser's book is an important study and a useful contribution to initiate reconceptualising (and redescribing) in our discipline: media criticism (or knowledge of media textures) "provides a viable strategy for a fuller understanding of texts as they function within communication systems" (Loubser, 2007:165).

Problematic Aspects

There are two interrelated shortcomings that limit Loubser's work. Firstly, it falls short when it comes to detailed (socio-cultural) historical investigations of ancient orality and literacy – an ethnography of ancient communication, in a manner of speaking. Despite the overall persuasiveness of Loubser's studies, his presentation of ancient media dynamics lacks historical detail and contextual grounding.

Secondly, and precisely in order to clarify Greco-Roman literacy, a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of communication is necessary. For his theorising and methodological claims Loubser relies very much on the synthesis developed by Ong (1982) – which was intended as an *introduction*, a summary of Ong's view on how writing "shaped and powered the intellectual activity of *modern man*" and never as a methodological guideline.⁵ It is this specific reliance that undermines Loubser's very aim of developing a 'systems approach'. Loubser does not make use of the anthropological critiques of Ong's synthesis (or

⁵ See Ong 1982:82 (his italics). In the recent updated edition (Ong & Hartley, 2012) it is emphasised that study of the contrast between orality and literacy "is largely unfinished business" and that it is best to see these perspectives and insights as 'theorems': "more or less hypothetical statements" describing and explaining orality and the orality-literacy shift (Ong & Hartley 2012:153).

incorporate the many extensions/refinements available in such studies: Briggs 2013; Clark, 1999; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998:309-321; Porcello, et al. 2010; Swearingen, 1986), nor does he take cognisance of the response by communication theorists (Kennedy, 1991; Payne, 1991; Olson, 1994; Bloch, 1998; Langlois, 2006; Durant, 1997). Consequently Loubser remains stuck with positing an oral mentality in the strong, epistemologically determinative sense, from which he then derives various theological and conceptual features of early Christianity. The idea of a determinative form of an oral mentality has been shown to be problematic (e.g., Finnegan, 1988; Worthington, 1996; Cole & Cole, 2006). Starting off with an overstated adversarial preconception of orality and literacy, Loubser operates with an unhistorical *dualism*, contrary to his own intentions.

The implicit divide and opposition between orality and literacy is simply not realistic in view of the extensive ethnographic reports from around the world (Finnegan, 2001; Theall, 1992), and research about literacy practices (Finnegan, 1988; Snyder, 1990; Reder & Davila, 2005), which stresses the interaction of orality and literacy. This interactive scenario holds true for both ancient and medieval traditions.

Speech *and* writing are present and influential in ‘traditional’ cultures, as significant oral modes of communication that persist powerfully in communities acquiring and practising literacy. After all, “literacy was *formed, shaped, and conditioned* by the oral world that it penetrated” (Graff, 1987:5; Killingsworth, 1993:27). Deborah Tannen’s cross-cultural research places in doubt at least one of the supposed analytical mainstays of the orality/literacy opposition, namely the ‘de-contextualisation hypothesis,’ the idea that writing is less context-dependent than speech – lending weight to the point about not generalising Ong’s categories. De-contextualisation does not apply to speech and writing *per se*, but rather to *informal conversational speech* as opposed to *formal academic writing* (Tannen, 1982a; 1982b; Chafe & Tannen, 1987; Hunter, 1996).

Orality is an almost magical wand in Loubser’s studies, revealing true consciousness and generating something unlike anything we (literates) are familiar with. This is belied by Loubser’s own description of Greco-Roman antiquity as a *mixed-media* culture with the manuscript medium itself integrally comprising the co-existent operations of writing, orality and memory. Clearly, investigating and then integrating more of ancient communication is required, but also a better theoretical framework. Orality versus literacy was a useful first step, a ‘strong thesis’ to provoke reflection, but now we need more articulate models that square with historical realities and generate appropriate appreciation of verbal art.

‘Poetics’ rather than ‘Criticism’

Because it is a useful contribution – Loubser’s book is not about just another ‘approach’ to the New Testament, but about fundamental problems with the media assumptions that supply the cognitive frameworks within which biblical scholarship operates – it is important to respond to the challenges raised by him. In order to contribute to curing our ‘media blindness’ (Loubser, 2007:v, 3, 52, 133), I recommend that we learn oral poetics.

As important as ‘media criticism’ (Loubser’s preferred ‘model’ for interpretation) is as a tool to interpret ancient documents, ‘oral poetics’, as an open-ended interpretive and performative hermeneutical process allows us to avoid the simplification of ‘adding’ one more criticism to the exegetical toolbox. The discussion thus far makes one aware that more than just another method or procedure is called for – rather, we are required to think of a *poetics*, an *oral poetics*. Traditionally poetics deals with the system of conscious and unconscious aesthetic and technical principles that govern the production and interpretation of verbal art. Yet it is an inherently pragmatic and pluriform activity, which, with the identifier ‘oral’

emphasises voice, participation, performance, translation, contextualisation and impact (cf. Tedlock, 1977; Amodio, 1995:58-59).

Towards an Oral Poetics (for early Christian Traditions)

The Spelling eye and the Listening Ear

‘Listening ear’ and ‘spelling eye’ are concepts that I discovered in the context of reviewing the practices of teachers of literature, who are dealing with a bias toward (or overemphasis on) the printed word.⁶ The contrast expressed by the two designations is, on the one hand, studying a text with ‘an eye toward’ precision of textual and word features, as different, on the other hand, from paying intent attention to the communicative event, ‘listening’ thoughtfully to what is being conveyed. The underlying idea is that it would be a very poor comprehension that prefers to examine a text (and correct the spelling, so to speak) rather than attend to the possible realisation of the text. The spelling eye ‘fixes’ the text, whilst the listening ear is aware of the multifaceted processes when a body speaks to others.

One of the insights that media criticism brings to the interpretation of ancient texts is the need to recover the possible *aural* aspects of these texts. Any attempt to bring voice to a text means assuming and construing *an* audience. The spelling eye strives to bring to *the* text *one* audience (which, in practice, basically are the dictionary and the grammar rulebook). The listening ear knows that there are always various voices with many audiences; it does not look for the context of a text because it gives precedence to contextualisation. It imaginatively perks up the ears to hear the voice, and to sense the body projecting that voice, striving for sense and understanding.

The listening ear is a way of dissolving the opposition ‘seen’ by the spelling eye between the denotative and connotative meaning of a text. Listening is to be aware of the continuum of meanings, to shift beyond the denotative *versus* the connotative towards a *balance* of denotation and connotation. ‘Denotative’ refers to the strictly textual, a sort of ‘dictionary’ level of meaning of words in a given context, whereas ‘connotative’ meaning refers to the traditional associations that memory attaches to words in a given context (Foley, 1991:xiv-xv, 8-9; 1995:50). ‘Connotation’ includes certain commonly held values, attitudes, and feelings, what Foley describes as ‘traditional referentiality’.⁷ An easy example could be the unexpected and strange call by a centurion that, as Jesus breathes his last, “this man was a son of God” (Mk. 15.39). Here υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν opens an untextual (yet very contextualised) range of connotative meanings eclipsing its denotative value: a dying man symbolising divinity, politics, social relations and critiques of power. One might also think of the possibilities presented by σωτήρ in the Pauline literature, given the strong presence of divine healing in urban settings where Asklepieai were not only in clear view, but where Asklepios

⁶ Such as Bomer, 2006; Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2010. The particular terms seem to have been introduced by Helene Magaret. Magaret wrote that that “at best the written word is only a symbol of that which is spoken and that the study of literature can never be divorced from the study of speech” (Magaret, 1951:32). It should be noted that her concern was primarily the improvement of spelling (literacy among American youth).

⁷ ‘Traditional referentiality’ is Foley’s concept to indicate that the structure of an oral work of art summons certain meanings by virtue of its traditionality. The concept includes various extra-textual dimensions, which comprise the personal, but more significantly the extra-personal, collective knowledge that the members of a community share – a complex of unpronounced norms, beliefs, expectations, conventions, and the like which are vitalised by oral works (Foley, 1991:59ff.).

was successfully displayed and invoked as the saviour.⁸ The deep interest of early Christianity in healing shaped their Christology.

The *listening ear* model that I am proposing is founded upon a conception of social life as discursively constituted, produced and reproduced in situated acts of speaking and other signifying practices that are simultaneously anchored in their situational contexts of use and transcendent of them, linked by inter-discursive ties to other situations, other acts, other utterances. The socio-historical continuity and coherence manifested in these inter-discursive relationships rests upon cultural repertoires of concepts and practices that serve as sets of ‘frames’ for the production, reception, and circulation of discourse (cf. Bauman, 2004; 2013 and Nagler, 1976).

This is a contextual approach, which seeks to understand not so much the forms of the New Testament’s oral-derived texts (though such investigations are part of it), but how these forms generate meaning(s) in their various contexts of use.

To explicate this contextual approach a bit more, the social poetics of oral literature as developed by John Niles (1993; 1999; 2013) is useful. Particularly with regard to verbal art (so-called oral literature) Niles develops a poetics that brings the social praxis (the social functions) of traditional storytelling to the fore. In addition to asking what, or how, traditional stories mean (in the sense of textual features), Niles insists that we also ask practical questions: “What work does a narrative of this kind do?” “What are the cultural questions to which a narrative of this kind represents an answer?” (Niles, 1999:120).

Building on the research done by Niles, six *linked* social functions of traditional storytelling can be identified: (1) the ludic: the effectiveness of all other functions of a presentation basically resides in the capacity of stories to compel attention, to entertain; it is the fact that such art is a form of collective play that enables a tradition “to bear effortlessly a heavy cargo of meaning” (Niles, 1999:70); (2) the sapiential: a traditional narrative has pedagogical significance; it trains auditors to know the parts and understand the principles of the world they inhabit; (3) the normative: stories establish priorities of moral value and enculturate the auditor to an ethical system by inspiring emulation or avoidance; (4) the constitutive: stories create a ‘heterocosm,’ an imaginative world that transcends ordinary reality but also refashions that reality into a system of symbolic categories: “inside and outside, now and then, here and there, us and them, male and female, young and old, free and unfree, safe and risky, the rulers and the ruled, the public and the private, the holy and the unholy, the clean and the unclean, the just and the unjust, and so on” (Niles, 1999:78); (5) the socially cohesive: traditional narratives manipulate an audience’s understanding of itself as a group, often through the construction of ethnic identities and various other solidarities and affiliations; and (6) the adaptive: traditional stories are an arena of cultural conflict and change, part of a dynamic continuum of telling and retelling whereby received ideas and values are constantly challenged, reaffirmed, or changed.

These are not genres, but functions of performed genres; in a way they are all present in verbal art – though of course one or more of these functions may dominate. Emphasising the functions to which the ‘listening ear’ is attuned, is also to affirm the importance of

⁸ The title ‘saviour’ was used in various ways in the ancient world, often for gods (Otto, 1910; Nock, 1951; Dibelius & Conzelmann, 1972:100-103). Generally speaking σωτήρ indicates the helper in time of need, bringer of deliverance and ‘salvation’, often with a sense of ‘conservator’ or ‘preserver’ as the ‘saving’ relating to the title was considered in a material way (hence the frequent combination of ‘saviour and benefactor’). However, it was mostly the god Asklepios who was seen as ‘saviour of all’ (e.g. Aelius Aristides *Orationes* 6.37.2). See further Coffman, 1993.

Rodríguez's argument that a multiplicity of factors should be carefully investigated when it comes to oral tradition, so that more than just the underlying conceptual source-field for a given text be uncovered. It is about describing "the multisensory, multilayered, totalising social context that enabled the early Christians to interpret and respond to their written texts" (Rodríguez, 2014:79).

Oral-aural Dynamics

When we look at Greek and Roman παιδεία for aspects of literacy teaching, and link this to discussions of interpretation by Greek and Roman authors, it is fairly evident that Greco-Roman authors produced their works with an auditory impact in mind. Presentation was a distinct element of reading and publication. They analysed works after the fact to evaluate (and improve) the *sounded* quality of their compositions.⁹ Their understanding of interpreting a text dealt with γραμματική, λέξις and σύνθεσις, the fundamental categories for literary analysis. 'Grammar' (γραμματική) was about εὐφωνία, pleasing sound; λέξις (speech) dealt with ἀρετή λέξεως, good diction. Composition (σύνθεσις) was about presenting harmony (ἡ ἄρμονία). A well-spoken composition contained harmonised sounds that were sweet to the ear (μελιχρὸν ἐν ταῖς ἀκοαῖς, Dionysius Halicarnassus *De compositione verborum* 1).

Various early church authors are often invoked to affirm the origins of the Gospels, but actual attention to the testimonies of Justin Martyr, Papias, and Clement Alexandria and their use of gospel traditions is illuminating:

It is as if each written text represents a particular performance of 'the gospel', the good news about Jesus, and, however much it is valued and respected, it retains its 'provisional' character as a performance, as one possible instantiation of *the* gospel. Contrary to what we might expect, it is the underlying story that has solidity, while the particular performance in which it is embodied ... has a more ephemeral quality (Alexander, 2006:23).

Of course, the difficulties of making such 'instantiations' visible (acknowledging that 'audible' is at best a to-be-hoped-for ambition) are considerable. Yet, significant success is possible. Martin Jaffee's essay, "Honi the Circler in manuscript and memory: an experiment in 're-oralising' the Talmudic text" (2009), building on the work of Foley (1995), attempts to balance the recovery of an orally mediated tradition with a detailed analysis of the hand-written texts. It is precisely this kind of balance that the *listening ear* is about. It is also precisely this balance which eludes much of biblical media-critical scholarship; we seem to either forget the scriptural, 'hand'-based nature of all our data or to underestimate the significance of the oral setting contextualising the ancient written texts.

Jaffee offers two presentations of the Honi tradition¹⁰ from the Munich manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud. The first illustrate the visual appearance of that tradition in the Munich Manuscript, "attempting to represent in English what a reader of the manuscript finds in the published facsimile edition: line after undifferentiated line of text without any of the normal cues of punctuation that would signal to a reader how to vocalise the text" (Jaffee, 2009:91).

⁹ Lee & Scott, 2009:91-134. There is a wealth of information to be mined from studies on ancient literary criticism, even though few explicitly analyse aural-auditory aspects of ancient literary theory; see De Jonge, 2008; Grafton 1998; McNelis, 2002; 2007; Nünlist, 2009; Yunis, 2003.

¹⁰ Honi the Circler, "the most famous of a number of Second Temple holy men whose feats are recounted in the rabbinic literature" (Jaffee, 2009:91).

The second presentation employs different typefaces (italics, plain text, boldfaced type, capital letters, etc.) in an attempt

to represent visually the various oral-performative sources of textual tradition that are manifest in the editorial shaping of the material but concealed by the scribal format of the manuscript.

My goal is to permit the reader to grasp the fundamental ways in which the linear, scribal version of the Talmud neutralises the oral-performative traces of the transmitted text even as it becomes the very condition of the recovery of the text's oral life (Jaffee, 2009:91).

Jaffee does not – indeed cannot – provide any methodologically rigorous criteria to prove that the ‘oral-performative’ interpretation of the Honi pericope actually happened. He acknowledges this problem (Jaffee, 2009:96-97), but does not abandon the *attempt* to recover oral-performative dynamics that we know contextualised the written textual artifacts. Simply because we cannot know whether, or how well, we have recovered those dynamics does not preclude exploration.¹¹ “An ‘oralist’ reading of rabbinic texts ... reminds the reader that the written manuscript is not the text itself, but the storage space for that part of the text that can be represented in fixed, visual form” (Jaffee, 2009:110).

We cannot know with any certainty the extent to which Jaffee’s ‘re-oralisation’ of the Honi pericope restages how that pericope would have been heard by its audiences in any given historical setting, but we can appreciate how the presentation of the text in discrete breath-units with highlighting of the multiple voices comprising the Talmudic text adds depth and texture to the words on a page.

There are many implications that follow from attention to sound patterns, rhythm, mnemonic constructions and auditory aspects: not only how texts are structured but also how they are experienced and received (Hearon, 2006). What an oral poetics invokes is clearly far more complex and involved than merely the reading out loud of a text.¹² It is to acknowledge that more than just the voice of the composer/poet (in the past pictured as *the* central figure) is involved, that there are various other participants who help to form the work and mediate its meaning and the dynamics through which this occurs (Finnegan, 1992:51).

The point is not so much about the correct presentation, but about better presentations: more and better and deeper contextualised readings, based on persuasive, detailed historical work evoking plausibility. It is to move beyond the conventional disembodied, solitary, silent and intellectual interpretation to an embodied, involved, exposed, vulnerable and actualising processual understanding.

Christians and Bible readers are fond of referring to the living word – but as Wendland¹³ so eloquently shows, exegetical and translation studies of the Bible fail woefully when it comes to providing “an ‘ear’ for their audiences to actually hear more of the Bible’s beauty and power, including its captivating vocal qualities” (Wendland, 2008:146).

¹¹ And, to remind ourselves, the impossibility of actual recovery *does not* mean conventional tradition criticism/source criticism must therefore be correct.

¹² Of course, we do not know how ancient Greek sounded (but cf. Caragounis, 1995), and accentuation is uncertain (Davies, 1996), but however the sounds were pronounced, they were pronounced consistently (Allen, 1993:8). The difficulties should not distract from the main issue: “In the study of a ‘dead’ language there is inevitably a main emphasis on the written word. But it is well to remember that writing is secondary to speech, and, however much it may deviate from it, has speech as its ultimate basis” (Allen, 1993:8).

¹³ Ernst Wendland has made a massive contribution to the study of orality and performance with regard to Scripture (cf. Wendland, 2008; 2012; 2013 from among his many studies). It must be pointed out that Wendland prefers to limit oral hermeneutics to the stylistic elements of Scripture.

Oral Poetics: Performance Criticism

The basic aspects of performance studies – as an academic discipline – are not new, namely to consider traditions and texts as scripts only fully realised in performance, and performance as a mode of speaking. Performance studies relates to anthropology, culture studies, theatre studies, literary criticism and the study of oral traditions (Foley, 1992; Joubert, 2004:3-181; Schechner, 2013; Turner, 1986). Significant performance critical investigations of New Testament texts have already been done (e.g., Botha, 1992; Davis, 1999; Harvey, 1998; Oestreich, 2016; Shiell, 2011; Wendland, 2012).

Among biblical scholars different accents are placed by different researchers. So Maxey prefers to emphasise performance criticism as a contribution, analysing “a biblical text through the translation, preparation, and performance of a text for group discussion of the performance event” (Maxey, 2009b:42). The purpose is to foster appreciation of performance for the appropriation of the Bible in the modern world.

Others note the encompassing presence of performance in ancient communication, being as it was embedded in an oral-aural, high-context, face-to-face, socially-oriented, participatory and relational culture. Speaking, listening, gesturing, observing and memorising were the typical, even primary means of everyday communication, properly characterised by an oral ‘register’ of discourse consisting of associated traditions, memories, experiences, images, and the like (Hearon, 2006:6-15; 2014; Kelber, 2007; Rhoads, 2006a; 2006b).

As an interdisciplinary hermeneutical strategy, performance criticism interacts with ethno-poetics, social-scientific criticism, rhetoric studies, rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism and cultural hermeneutics and its constitutive role in oral poetics is evident.

In a technical sense, performance criticism of ancient (written) texts searches out traces of orality; interrogating attributes of written literature for residing or embedded oral, vocal, performative features. Such indirect signs – ‘voice prints’ or ‘sound maps’ – of oral thought and articulation identifiable within the text would include features like the following: the occurrence of dynamic, distinctly interactive discourse; indicators of personal involvement (such as emotions, facial expressions and gestures); aural signals, such as formulas opening or closing a discourse segment; patterns of lexical repetition; recurring themes and motifs; phonological reiteration (e.g., alliteration); apparent ungrammaticalities (such as paratactic, event-laden sentences, ambiguous references, and inconsistent deixis, cf. Oesterreicher, 1997:200); verbal recursion of various types (such repetitive and definitional patterns not only structure the text, but make it more ‘presentable’ and aurally memorable), and then image-based techniques to evoke visualisation of the textual content.

The Gospel of Mark’s preference for sequences of vivid actions, and its plot-governed, descriptive narrative, have drawn a number of performance critical investigations (Boomershine, 2015; Maxey, 2010; Shiner, 2004). Hortatory prophetic and epistolary literature also lend themselves to performance, such as the Letter of James, with its graphic, symbolical, and controversial images (see Wendland, 2008:57-142).

The performance is not merely a subdued event for a subservient audience, but an opportunity for co-creation of meaning with the reader/teller/performer by means of metonymic references. The performance, in other words, is not only an aesthetic event, but a *rhetorical* event, as the performer, in a manner of speaking, persuades the listening audience to participate in and agree with his/her way of directing the communal experience (Quick, 2011:598).

One of the neglected issues in scholarly reflection on the functions and contexts of the New Testament documents is investigation of what actually happened when the text arrived at its (supposed) destination.

In conventional perspective, an implicit assumption is clearly that the text was presented under perfect conditions to a perfectly docile and understanding audience. Other typical assumptions deal with what happened immediately after the text had been delivered. Yes, what did happen then? Surely the text was *not* xeroxed and exact copies distributed throughout the congregation? Surely it was *not* reprinted and filed in the libraries of various private households? Surely it was *not* made into a poster stuck up on the congregation's public notice board with all issues addressed and finalised?

An oral poetics interrogates precisely the various possible performance possibilities of the text. It was 'reproduced' in conversations, meetings and private discussions, provoking a range of presentations and responses (and in that way it became 'tradition'). It was probably copied by some scribes with varying accuracy for various reasons – at a fee for a passer-by, or for a patron, and then those copies were presented at a variety of situations each with smaller or greater deviations from other presentations.

To actualise such questions in NT scholarship demands that we adapt our understanding of the meaning and rhetoric of early Christian writings by means of performance criticism. We need to approach manuscripts as performance events, considering the intertwining (συμπλοκή) of author, performer, audience, material settings/aspects, social circumstances (keeping in mind the tentative, exploratory and open-endedness of such results).

Early Christian manuscripts should be approached as verbal art, fused into verbal behaviour. Methodologically one starts from the text, but on an interpretative level the approach is through performance, and that means that the living world itself becomes the point of reference. Within an oral poetics questions about the historical at the core of the stories change; they become attempts to understand the relationship of the characters and themes with the repertoire of stories and motifs that shaped, influenced and generated the story under review, rigorously analysing the textual features as elements of performance events.

Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion the idea of an oral poetics as the 'listening ear' can be summarised as follows.

- The oral-traditional context of New Testament and early Christian writings can no longer be ignored. Media criticism (to borrow from Loubser) is here to stay, and is to become an unavoidable part of exegesis. Much greater attention should be given to the performance dimension of the ancient world and to the experience/role of performances by ancient Christian authors, narrators, teachers and audiences.
- In antiquity, publication meant oral performance, reading meant memorising for storage and recall. Consequently, we need to deal with how spoken literature builds structure that is received and comprehended in time, not space, outlining the functions of repetition, sound's primary structuring device.
- The results of philological and exegetical work, and especially translations should be judged not on the basis of their acceptability as silent written literature, but on the basis of how it 'performs' when read aloud, how it strikes ears that have been re-educated to the subtlety and richness of the spoken word (Tedlock, 1977:516).
- The interrelationship between spoken words and written words in the rhetorical world of antiquity can be actualised by means of a multi-modal, social historical and social semiotic study, emphasising the oral-aural features of the texts. Such an oral poetics elucidates, in terms of form-function-meaning interrelationships, how genre and performance may be keyed and rekeyed, contextualised and re-contextualised, and turned to the fulfilment of social ends (Bauman, 2004:12).

- We cannot settle for the comfortable sinecure of the strictly literary criticism of the ‘spelling eye’ any longer. With ‘listening ears’ we need to strike out with bold new hypotheses based on the data of recent discoveries about oral and traditional verbal art, explicated by sound, detailed historical work. Such hypotheses are bound to be closer approximations of what ancient texts can convey than those based on post-oral, non-traditional literature (cf. Foley, 1981:122).

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