

On the Use and Abuse of “Orality” for Art: Reflections on Romantic and Late Twentieth-Century *Poiesis*

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It is not an overstatement to say that, in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries, almost every major British literary poet found him- or herself engaging with oral tradition, as well as with the figure of the oral poet, his work, his cultural position, and his method of composition. Oral tradition acquired new status not only as a legitimate fund of cultural authority but also a resource for the making and annotating of “original,” literary poetry.¹ The image of the oral poet, moreover, fired the Romantic imagination—whether this poet was imagined as Ossian, “the last of his race,” purported bard of third-century Scottish warriors,² or as a seventeenth-century “last minstrel” singing his dying

¹ On the changing and disputed cultural status of oral tradition[s] in British literary culture, see in particular Trumpener 1997. With respect to Scotland in particular, and its simultaneous idealization and degradation of “the oral,” see Fielding 1996.

² On the controversy attending the Ossian poems, published by James Macpherson throughout the 1760s, there is an ever-growing bibliography. To examine further the cause of this furor, see Macpherson 1996. For a lucid and measured survey of the Ossian controversy, its “three phases,” and more broadly of Macpherson’s career, see deGategno 1989. The impact of “Ossianism” on eighteenth-century literary culture is signaled in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gill’s *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998). Stafford has written extensively on Macpherson, his career, the Ossian poems, and their reception: see, for example, Stafford 1988 and 1994:ch. 4. Trumpener 1997 offers a compelling analysis of the cultural politics of the Ossian controversy, Samuel Johnson’s role in fomenting it, his famed hostility to Scotland, and more particularly his rejection of oral tradition. That the cultural politics of Ossian remain volatile is evident in the collection of fiercely partisan [pro-Macpherson] critical essays gathered in Gaskill 1991.

strains to defeated Scots nobles, or as a contemporary Highland lass singing as she reaped.³

In the following pages I propose to discuss what has been called “the romance of orality”⁴ as a particularly lively and vexed opportunity for literary poets, both romantic and contemporary. For writers such as Walter Scott, Thomas Moore, Robert Burns, and William Wordsworth, ancient ballads and contemporary oral traditions offered a kind of poetic archive, a resource both for writing their own poetry and for theorizing the cultural work of poetry. There is by now a critical consensus that British Romantics, like their German counterparts, turned to ideas of the primitive, organic culture, folk essence, and fantasies of childish or *völkisch* naïveté in their efforts to rejuvenate what they saw as a hidebound art: this is one way to understand, for example, the elevation of the ballad in the late eighteenth century. This romance between highly cultivated literary poets and the primitive, however defined, must equally be seen as a romance with orality.

To map fully the longstanding literary romance with orality—a romance that still persists, as I will later argue—is a task that exceeds the scope of this essay; we can, however, begin to sketch the contours of some of its constitutive aspects. In recent decades, scholars have reanimated the “scandals of the ballad,” to use Susan Stewart’s phrase: controversies involving disputes over authenticity, fakery, and forgery; the status of oral tradition and manuscript evidence; and national and otherwise partisan styles of editing and scholarship.⁵ The historicist and materialist turn in contemporary literary studies helps us to see how these eighteenth-century scandals—fueled by the success of James Macpherson’s Ossian poems, Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Chatterton’s

³ For a discussion of the image of “the last bard” and the trope of “the last of the race,” see Stafford 1994:espec. ch. 4 and ch. 7. Among the many such representations, Walter Scott’s “Lay of the Last Minstrel” (1805) was the most commercially successful. The poem as cited here is from the 1830 edition of *The Poetical Works of Walter Scott, together with the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Scott 1830). Further references to the poem will be cited in text by canto and stanza.

⁴ In McLane 2001. I have since discovered that in her wonderful *Writing and Orality* (1996) Penny Fielding uses the same phrase, observing that when the “romance of orality” is “constructed by a dominant ideology it begins to look suspiciously like writing” (10)—that is, as fixed, authoritative, monologic, and culturally hegemonic. Some oralities, that is, are better than others, and in a “graphocentric society” (10), it is the elite literati who sift and determine the values and meanings of the oral.

⁵ Stewart 1994:espec. ch. 3 and ch. 4.

fabricated Rowley poems, and numerous ballad collections—emerged within a context of cultural nationalism (e.g. in the Ossian controversy, which pitted Scottish literary nationalists against English chauvinist foes like Samuel Johnson), changing copyright law, and new institutions of print capital.⁶

The editors and literary imitators of “ancient ballads” presented their works in book form to literate, cultivated audiences; these literary productions explicitly concerned themselves with the problem of representing, theorizing, and historicizing “orality,” including such features as composition-in-performance, communal memory, folk tradition, oral transmission, and mediation. Particularly striking is the development, in the work of such antiquarians as Thomas Percy and later Romantic poet-editors like Walter Scott, of preliminary and controversial “oral theories” of poetry, including theories about the “ancient minstrels” who purveyed ballads and romances.⁷ The figure of the minstrel, reconstructed and reinvented in the mid-eighteenth century, emerges as one type of the oral poet; he also emerges, in antiquarian and romantic discourse, as the figure of poetic obsolescence and decay.⁸

⁶ For trenchant accounts of these scandals and their implications, see Stewart 1994, which emphasizes the historical-material conditions of literary production, and Trumpener 1997, which focuses on the dialectic between imperialism and cultural nationalism. Groom 1999 offers not only a thorough account of Percy’s project but also invaluable reflections on the theoretical implications of Percy’s edition, which Groom characterizes as “a three-volume anthology of ballads, songs, sonnets, and romances . . . probably the finest example of the antiquarian tendency in later eighteenth-century poetry. It is also symptomatic of the emerging discipline of scholarly editing. It dramatizes the encounters between literate and oral media, between polite poetry and popular culture, and between scholarship and taste” (2). See Groom 1999 as well for the religious and nationalistic animosities fueling the antagonism between partisans of Percy and those of his scourge, the antiquarian and editor Joseph Ritson.

⁷ For Percy’s musings on English minstrels, see Percy 1886/1996:Appendix I. For further reflections on Percy’s minstrel theory, see Groom 1999:espec. 61-105. For Scott’s account of minstrel poetry, see Scott 1830:5-16. On the revivification of minstrels and “minstrel origins theory,” see Stewart 1994.

⁸ As Groom writes, “Minstrels . . . were oral poets” (1999:99). The minstrel offered Percy an image of the English oral poet that could, in colonialist fashion, subsume and trump images of Welsh and Scottish bards; English minstrelsy was also a mechanism for gathering and nationalizing local and regional poetic traditions within England. Groom notes further that “Minstrels also developed at the margins of orality and literacy. By plotting the borders, Percy melded together a national tradition, and clarified Englishness” (100).

These developments may be seen as aspects of what we might call “the oral turn” in the literature of this period. Recent scholarship on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature has illuminated the cultural and political stakes of this turn; oral theory and media theory help us to reflect further on the processes of mediation (for example, transcription, printing, and other forms of textual “fixing”) required by literary uses of orality.⁹ And thus we might ask: how was orality harnessed to romantic poetry? What discursive functions did an invocation of “oral communication” or “oral tradition” perform? What kind of authority was imagined to inhere in such invocations? What did the imagined fate of orality have to say about the fate of literary poetry? How did the turn to orality inform literary poets’ poems as well as their notions about performance, composition, mediation, and transmission?

The early work of Walter Scott and William Wordsworth will help us to meditate on, if not answer, some of these questions. Both of these poets, especially early in their careers, were preoccupied with and stimulated by the problem of representing orality. And as poets considered by their contemporaries as well as ours to be representative of their age, Scott and Wordsworth offer—in their divergent approaches to oral problematics and literary *poiesis*—exemplary cases.¹⁰

Representing Orality: Romantic *Poiesis*, Mediation, and the Oral-Literate Problematic

Ventriloquizing and Historicizing Orality: Scott’s Minstrelsy

The last of all the Bards was he,
 Who sung of Border chivalry;
 For, welladay! their date was fled,
 His tuneful brethren all were dead;
 And he, neglected and oppress’d,
 Wish’d to be with them, and at rest.

Walter Scott, *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Introduction to Canto I, 7-12

⁹ Some essential texts informing this discussion, in addition to those already mentioned, are Ong 1982, Finnegan 1992, Goody 1977, Havelock 1986, and Nagy 1996.

¹⁰ See, for example, Hazlitt’s remarks (1930): “Walter Scott is the most popular of all the poets of the present day, and deservedly so. . . . He has none of Mr Wordsworth’s *idiosyncrasy*” (154); “Mr Wordsworth is the most original poet now living. He is the reverse of Walter Scott in his defects and excellences” (156).

Walter Scott’s best-selling *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) offers one spectacular example of the uses to which orality could be put. From his first collection, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3), through his series of long narrative poems (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* being only the first of several minstrelling romances), Scott was the romantic writer who most thoroughly worked through and worked over the oral-poetic problematic, which in his case we might call the problematic of minstrelsy. His corpus is a long meditation on the end, in all senses, of minstrels. If Scott’s literary work both displayed and discussed what Stewart calls “the literary self-consciousness of antiquarianism” (1994:25), his work also revealed the historiographic and ethnographic self-consciousness of early nineteenth-century literature.

Scott took over from the antiquarians the reinvented minstrel—the professional transmitter of the oral-poetic tradition—and made him a historicizable mouthpiece. As “last of all the bards,” the minstrel is not only the figure of cultural obsolescence, of the defeat of traditional Scottish culture: he is also the figure through whom Scott can both represent oral *poiesis* and chronicle its obsolescence.

In the course of *The Lay*, Scott’s minstrel has several ostentatiously self-reflexive moments when he pauses to reflect on his song, other versions of it, how he came to be fluent in it. Consider, for example, this passage near the end of canto 4, when the minstrel interrupts his account of the English and Scottish warriors’ agreement to abide by the results of single combat “on foot” (xxxiii):

XXXIV.

I know right well, that, in their lay,
 Full many minstrels sing and say,
 Such combat should be made on horse,
 On foaming steed, in full career,
 With brand to aid, when as the spear
 Should shiver in the course:
 But he, the jovial Harper, taught
 Me, yet a youth, how it was fought,
 In guise which now I say;
 He knew each ordinance and clause
 Of Black Lord Archibauld’s battle-laws,
 In the old Douglas’ day.
 He brook’d not, he, that scoffing tongue
 Should tax his minstrelsy with wrong,
 Or call his song untrue:
 For this, when they the goblet plied,

And such rude taunt had chafed his pride,
 The Bard of Reull he slew.
 On Teviot's side, in fight they stood,
 And tuneful hands were stain'd with blood;
 Where still the thorn's white branches wave,
 Memorial o'er his rival's grave.

Among the features worth remarking in this passage:

1. The minstrel's ready reference to and insertion of himself within a community of song-makers, within a song-culture: "I know right well . . . full many minstrels sing and say. . . ."

2. The minstrel's representation of his narrative as a tradition learned from another: a "jovial Harper" "taught" him while "yet a youth." The minstrel understands his lay, his corpus, to be an inherited one, and he foregrounds its transmission. This past moment of learning is converted into the "now" of the minstrel's saying: "In guise which now I say." The minstrel, then, understands his lay as a re-creation of previous lays, a saying of the same again.¹¹

3. The song tradition here as the historical tradition, replete with martial specifics. For the minstrel, there is no difference between historical and song traditions.

4. The minstrel's participation in the competitive ethos of the warrior culture he celebrates: he trumpets his account as one different from, and superior to, "the lay" of other minstrels. If they claim "such combat should be made on horse," he insists that combatants met "on foot," battling "hand to hand." His account is *one among many*, the minstrel implicitly acknowledges, yet his is the best, whatever "many minstrels" may "sing and say." The minstrel's competitive spirit is as traditional as his lay: as he says, his own teacher refused to tolerate "scoffing tongue[s]," and quite readily "slew" bardic adversaries—The Bard of Reull. "Tuneful hands were stain'd with blood," his former student declares, apparently cheerfully. An unapologetic rivalry emerges clearly as the engine of minstrelsy. *The Lay* thus announces its commitment to praise and blame, to rivalry and combat, to competitive as well as communal making. This *Lay* also, and not incidentally, allies a history of Scottish poetry—as much as Scottish history—with a warrior ethos and transparent masculinity.

In the very next stanza, however, the minstrel acknowledges that the romance of continuous transmission, of rivalrous making, is over: the

¹¹ Gregory Nagy (1996:4) argues that the "mimesis" of oral performance should be understood as "dramatic re-enactment."

minstrel has outlasted his community, which had heretofore guaranteed the meaningful singing of his song:

XXXV.

Why should I tell the rigid doom,
 That dragg'd my master to his tomb;
 How Ousenam's maidens tore their hair,
 Wept till their eyes were dead and dim,
 And wrung their hands for love of him.
 Who died at Jedwood Air?
 He died!—his scholars, one by one,
 To the cold silent grave are gone;
 And I, alas! survive alone
 To muse o'er rivalries of yore,
 And grieve that I shall hear no more
 The strains, with envy heard before;
 For, with my minstrel brethren fled,
 My jealousy of song is dead.

The lament for the “master” is also a lament for minstrel- and warrior-culture, the end of productive rivalry: “my jealousy of song is dead.” It is striking to see that signal Romantic lament—“And I, alas! survive alone”—emerge in this context. The minstrel exists as an “I” only inasmuch as he emerges as one of a minstrel band. Minstrels, that is, lack individuality, personhood, interiority, subjectivity; they are the vectors of culture, mediums *par excellence*. Having his minstrel reflect on his cultural predicament, Scott develops a theoretically informed and powerful image: that of a native-informant minstrel-maker who can report and meditate as it were “authentically” on oral poetry, song-culture, and its rivalrous ethos—an image the particulars of which contemporary oral theory seems to confirm.

In presenting and representing minstrels, moreover, the Romantic poet allowed himself to explore his proximity and distance from minstrel-making and minstrel-culture. The minstrel is inevitably a figure not only of the past or of the proleptically past but of the contemporary poet's *method*, both literary and historiographic. In writing minstrelsy, the modern poet both imaginatively and materially remediates minstrelsy, taking it out of the mouths of singers and the realm of immediate audiences and into the domain of writing and manuscript or print circulation. If in himself the minstrel bears the mark of orality and indeed of the residual itself, the literary representation of the minstrel depends upon his supercession, the triumph of print culture and, in the broadest cultural and political sense, of the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, and the ascendancy of empire.

The Lay of the Last Minstrel is also a witty and yet disturbingly knowing meditation on virtually every anxiety of the poet, whether ancient or modern, oral or literary. On the poet's concern for audience, consider the hapless minstrel at the end of his first "fitt" (end of Canto I; italics mine):

Here paused the harp; and with its swell
 The Master's fire and courage fell;
 Dejectedly, and low, he bow'd,
 And, gazing timid on the crowd,
*He seemed to seek, in every eye,
 If they approved his minstrelsy;*
 And, diffident of present praise,
 Somewhat he spoke of former days,
 And how old age, and wand'ring long,
 Had done his hand and harp some wrong.
 The Duchess, and her daughters fair,
 And every gentle lady there,
 Each after each, in due degree,
 Gave praises to his melody;
 His hand was true, his voice was clear,
 And much they long'd the rest to hear.
 Encouraged thus, the Aged Man,
 After meet rest, again began.

In such a passage, Scott takes great pains to represent the oral poet's embodied relation to the audience (notably marked as both noble and female), a relation in which face-to-face contact and immediate somatic feedback are the conditions of recitation and performance. Scott thus marks the historical distance between the situation of the minstrel's recitation and his own poem, bound as it eventually was in printed books, destined for a literate audience of thousands—an audience of men as well as women, of Englishmen as well as Scotsmen, of learned as well as unlearned readers, of lawyers, merchants, academics, and farmers as well as aristocrats. At the level of minstrel metaphors, then, Scott creates a space for constituting, doubling, differentiating, and indeed historicizing the relation of poet-to-audience.

For this minstrel, performance is an arduous task, hesitantly begun and then ecstatically, albeit erratically, continued (end of Introduction, Canto I, 84-100):

Amid the strings his fingers stray'd,
 And an uncertain warbling made,
 And oft he shook his hoary head.

But when he caught the measure wild,
 The old man raised his face, and smiled;
 And lighten'd up his faded eye,
 With all a poet's ecstasy!
 In varying cadence, soft or strong,
 He swept the sounding chords along;
 The present scene, the future lot,
 His toils, his wants, were all forgot:
 Cold diffidence, and age's frost,
 In the full tide of song were lost;
 Each blank in faithless memory void,
 The poet's glowing thought supplied;
 And, while his harp responsive rung,
 'Twas thus the Latest Minstrel sung.

Scott's intense focus on the minstrel's activity—his tuning up, his physical movements, his playing, his “uncertain warbling,” his anxious consciousness of the audience, his “ecstasy,” his intermittent depressions throughout the lay—casts a strange and ambiguous halo over the poem. If the poem often condescends to this minstrel—“infirm and old,” barely able to get his harp tuned and his measures flowing—nevertheless the poem ultimately articulates its primary narrative content through this decrepit figure, whom Scott tells us he introduced as a “prolocutor” or “pitch-pipe” meant to help modern readers more easily swallow the legendary stuff of the poem.¹² Such a passage relies, characteristically, on a kind of poetic filter, a constitutive mediation: Scott represents the minstrel's strumming “in varying cadence,” at various dynamics (“soft or strong”), finally catching “the measure wild.” Such a picture emerges, however, through the medium of Scott's own highly regulated measures, cast in writing and ultimately print, in a more or less standard English, unaccompanied by harp or even, if we are silently reading the lay, audible voice. We note as well that Scott differentiates his own framing narration from the minstrel's recitation by means of meter: he uses the octosyllabic “minstrel couplet” in the framing passages (see, for example, the passage immediately above) and a variable ballad stanza for

¹² For Scott's decision to use the minstrel as a framing device, see his “Introduction to ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’” (1830:315): “I entirely agreed with my friendly critic in the necessity of having some sort of pitch-pipe, which might make readers aware of the object, or rather the tone, of the publication. . . . I therefore introduced the figure of the Old Minstrel, as an appropriate prolocutor, by whom the lay might be sung, or spoken, and the introduction of whom betwixt the cantos, might remind the reader at intervals, of the time, place, and circumstances of the recitation. This species of *cadre*, or frame, afterwards afforded the poem its name of ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’.”

the minstrel's own recitation (see, for example, his account of his master's death). On the level of metrics, then, Scott both borrows from minstrelsy (using its characteristic couplet form) and differentiates himself from it (having his minstrel recite in another meter). If *The Lay* contains a narrative about border feuds, supernatural interventions, and romance triumphant, as well as a meta-narrative of historical change, the poem tells, on the level of poetic representation, yet another story: that of the disjunction between the minstrel's hesitant, effortful recitation and Scott's confident handling of it.

If Scott's conspicuous fluency differentiates him from the minstrel, nevertheless he also raises the inevitable specter of the minstrel as his own double. Singing on the edge of an abyss (his "date was fled"), the minstrel offers a parable of the modern poet's imminent obsolescence. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* is predicated on a trope of simultaneously conjunctive and disjunctive analogy. The minstrel, that is, as both like and unlike Scott, offered him a multivalent figure to think with and through. Scott emerges as a particular kind of poet in *The Lay*—a poet who makes poetry out of historically obsolete and yet picturesque poetic practices, practices clearly marked as oral *poiesis*. Scott's confident authority depends precisely on our *not taking* the minstrel as the proper analogue for the modern poet. Simultaneously historicizing the minstrel and analogizing with him, Scott's *Lay* vividly enacts what it encodes—to wit, the historicity of poetry and its mediations, and the cultural conditions of the poet.

The oral problematic of minstrelsy is, from this angle, the problem of the chronotope of *poiesis*—"chronotope" used here, in Bakhtin's sense, to mean the constitutive configuration of space and time within a literary work as well as the time-space relationships generated between the work and its compositional context.¹³ If the minstrel is the medium of the lay, Scott's representation of the minstrel *as* medium authorizes the lay precisely by historicizing his situation, what James Chandler would have us call his "case":¹⁴

¹³ See Bakhtin (1981), who observes that "it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (85). Characteristic of Scott's minstrelsy is its orchestration of several temporalities: the "now" of narration; the "then" within the narrative present; the time of any framing narration; the distance, if any, between these narratological temporalities; the time of composition; the time of notes and addenda; the time of revision; the time of successive editions; and so on. Scott's historiographically informed poetry develops chronotopical complexities that anticipate those of his historical novels.

¹⁴ On analyzing literary works as "cases," in the full casuistical, grammatical, and psychohistorical senses of the term "case," see Chandler 1998:espec. ch. 4.

The last of all the Bards was he,
 Who sung of Border chivalry;
 For welladay! their date was fled.

This trope of the fled “date,” the chronotope of a hazily but decidedly past past in a ruined, haunted place, a place saturated by the traumatic marks of time, is exactly what constitutes the space of recitation in *The Lay*. The minstrel’s pathos resides in his being residual, his date “fled.” The minstrel is himself conscious of his fled date: as we have seen, he laments within his narration that his brethren are all dead, and that the noble ethos of poetic competition has faded: “my jealousy of song is dead.”

Remembering days when he used to pour out “to lord and lady gay, / The unpremeditated lay,” this rather doleful specimen sings a lay that is doubly “of the Last Minstrel”—a lay sung *by* him but also, by virtue of Scott’s astonishing poetic and historiographic fluencies, a lay *about* him. Inasmuch as the lay is *his* lay, part of his minstrel-stock, and *perhaps the only lay* the last minstrel now possesses, the lay of the last minstrel is “of” him in yet a third sense. The punning condensation in the preposition “of” offers an allegory in miniature of Scott’s interest in the pre-position of the poet, in the poet’s *case*.

It is impossible to avoid the question of the good faith of such a representation, and many critics—both Scott’s contemporaries, notably William Hazlitt, and ours—find such alternately lugubrious and pugnacious renderings of the end of minstrels and of Scottish local culture to be, at best, a canny, slick appropriation, a masquerade capitalizing on shallow nostalgia while sating the public’s lust for picturesque sentiment, manners, and lore.¹⁵ Yet if Scott ventriloquized oral poetry in *The Lay*, he also showed himself, in his *Border Minstrelsy*, to be a passionate, rigorous advocate and preserver of its cultural value and poetic richness. In a fuller investigation of Scott’s romantic orality, one would wish to explore thoroughly his multivalent responses to and uses of the oral-poetic traditions he himself declared were dying off, “fled,” or dead.

¹⁵ For a sample of Hazlitt’s criticism, consider the following: “there is a modern air in the midst of the antiquarian research of Mr Scott’s poetry. It is history or tradition in masquerade. . . . He has just hit the town between the romantic and the fashionable; and between the two, secured all classes of readers on his side. In a word, I conceive that he is to the great poet, what an excellent mimic is to a great actor” (1930:155).

Mediating Orality: Wordsworth's Close Encounters of an Oral Kind

If Scott rendered oral recitation as pageant and spectacle, with minstrelsy a vehicle for a picturesque rendering of cultural history, Wordsworth approached the question of oral-poetic problematics from another angle. Scott largely confined his reflections on the use of orality to his notes and commentary, but Wordsworth often made oral-literate transactions the very “matter” of his poetry. For an illuminating distillation of the historical and material distances that oral poetry could travel, consider one of Wordsworth’s best-known poems, “The Solitary Reaper.” Beholding “yon solitary Highland Lass,” and enjoining us to do so as well, Wordsworth in the third stanza bursts forth impatiently (1946:77; ll. 17-32):

Will no one tell me what she sings?
 Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
 For old, unhappy, far-off things,
 And battles long ago:
 Or is it some more humble lay,
 Familiar matter of today?
 Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
 That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
 As if her song could have no ending;
 I saw her singing at her work,
 And o'er the sickle bending;—
 I listened till I had my fill,
 And, as I mounted up the hill,
 The music in my heart I bore,
 Long after it was heard no more.

Such stanzas may be read as Wordsworth’s astonishingly economical and lovely engagement with Romantic orality. As Peter Manning has reminded us, Wordsworth worked up this poem not from an actual encounter recalled from his and Dorothy’s 1803 tour of Scotland, but more directly from “a beautiful sentence” in his friend Thomas Wilkinson’s manuscript, *Tours to the British Mountains*.¹⁶ That a poem presenting a personally experienced,

¹⁶ Manning 1990:ch. 11. Manning’s elegant, trenchant essay offers a historicist corrective to and complication of Geoffrey Hartman’s previously dominant reading of the poem as another Wordsworthian movement of consciousness. Thanks to Ann Rowland for referring me to Manning’s essay. Of “The Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth remarked, “This Poem was suggested by a beautiful sentence in a MS. Tour in Scotland written by a Friend, the last line being taken from it *verbatim*.” See his note to the poem in Curtis

unmediated (if vexing) overhearing of oral lyric had its origins in—and drew its closing line from—another tourist’s written document only begins to suggest the always already fictive and “written” nature of “oral” encounters as they appear in Romantic poetry (not to mention the textually mediated vision of all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tourists). The poetic economy here, material and metaphorical, is obviously rich and potentially disquieting.¹⁷

If the poem lends itself to readings as a romantic expropriation of women’s, workers’, or Highlanders’ oral poetry (or, in a less sinister gloss, as an obfuscated appropriation of a friend’s manuscript), it also offers us the chance to read it as a melancholy methodological inquiry. The almost absurd question, “Will no one tell me what she sings?” propels a set of provisional responses and meditations on ballad genres: “what she sings” may be a “historical ballad” (to invoke Scott’s taxonomy),¹⁸ a tale of “old unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago”; but on the other hand, the song may be a “more humble lay, familiar matter of today.” The mysteriousness of the song lies not only in its linguistic inaccessibility—the Highland lass sang in Erse (Scottish Gaelic), Wordsworth’s source reports—but in this temporal ambiguity: the ballad may gesture back to time immemorial or may equally commemorate “today’s” news, news that, moreover, may be repeated in the future—she may well be singing of “pain / That has been, and may be again!”

The ballad chronotope—the space-time configuration of oral *poiesis*—here emerges as temporally extensive (from “long ago” to a

1983:415: Curtis identifies the friend as Thomas Wilkinson, and adds that his “*Tours to the British Mountains* (London, 1824) circulated among friends in MS. for years before it was published; the passage reads: ‘Passed a female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more’ [p. 12].”

¹⁷ A fuller account of this poem would have much to say about the exoticism of the Highland girl, Wordsworth’s eroticizing of her, his focus on her song as his pleasure, his taking of his “fill” at the expense of “her work,” his unrepresented transformation of source materials in generating a lyric of represented spontaneity. Critics such as Dave Harker have made us especially alert to the appropriations and expropriations of workers’ culture by non-laboring literati. For a minutely detailed and impassioned account of the class politics of folksong, ballad, and so on, see Harker 1985.

¹⁸ In Scott’s “Introduction” to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1830:36) he identifies the “three classes of poems” included in his collection: historical ballads, romantic ballads, and imitations of these compositions by modern authors.

possible future “again”) but spatially restrictive: Wordsworth offers in the Highland singer an image of a traditional culture recreating itself over time, from time immemorial; it is the image, perhaps nostalgic, of a rooted human community in its full temporal extension. That such a community appears in the highly marked regional figure of a Highland lass should not obscure the general point of Wordsworth’s inquiry; it was Wordsworth’s frequent strategy to meditate on the universal human through such “exotic” or “marginal” figures. It is of course striking and characteristically Wordsworthian that she be “single in the field,” solitary as the tree in the Immortality Ode, the one that gives him terrible pause. Despite her being “single,” she is hardly individuated: Wordsworth is less interested in the oral poet than in oral poetry.

Oral poetry here emerges not as the province of trained professional rivals (*pace* Scott’s minstrel corps) but rather as that haunting song that drifts through and between individuals. If Scott’s minstrel emphasizes the work of learning his lay, Wordsworth’s lass seems to know her song as it were unconsciously: her work is reaping, not singing, and her song comes unbidden, sung for none other (she thinks) than herself. Scott emphasizes the institutional situation, the explicit cultural formation, of song culture; Wordsworth finds in this song an occasion for meditating on the ambiguities of song, song-transmission, and song-matter. Note that Scott’s minstrel has no expectation that any of his audience will go out and repeat his lay; his is a professional recitation bespeaking years of training and specialization. The Highland lass shows us another aspect of oral poetry, song as a popular, unprofessional, communal inheritance—an inheritance, notably, represented as inaccessible—or, to be more precise, as only partially accessible—to Wordsworth. *That* she sings, he appreciates; *what* she sings, he cannot know. The tune carries, the semantic import does not. In terms of ballad *poiesis*, Wordsworth in “The Solitary Reaper” seems to anticipate an insight that later theorists, most notably Bertrand Harris Bronson, have also enunciated: that a ballad is a ballad only when it has a tune.¹⁹

“The Solitary Reaper” may be seen, then, as a performance in print of transformed and ostentatiously imperfect transmission. The reaper’s “song” becomes, of course, Wordsworth’s poem, “Solitary Reaper”: sung song becomes artifact. The poem explicitly offers a splitting between music and meaning, between measures and melody on the one hand—her “plaintive numbers”—and the verbal and thematic content of her words, the “matter.” The poem traces an allegory of translation and textualization but also of

¹⁹ For a version of this dictum, see Bronson 1959:ix: “*Question*: When is a ballad not a ballad? *Answer*: When it has no tune.”

dispersal: she sings “as if her song could have no ending.” Is this not the dream of poetry, and of those cultures, professions, and individuals who produce it? Wordsworth’s “as if” delicately places the pivot of the poem between perpetual presence (the time of singing, the sung “now”) and inevitable passing.

The pathos of this encounter is figured, perhaps inadvertently, in Wordsworth’s closing couplet. Having asked “what she sings,” having proposed possible answers, Wordsworth leaves “the Vale profound” (ll. 30-32):

And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

The poem offers us, of course, not her music but his, not her matter but his reflections on the indeterminacy of the song’s matter; the impasse between the reaping singer and the walking poet persists, a rebuke to fantasies of transparency and unobstructed mediation. It is striking that Wordsworth focuses most on the poet’s preoccupation, as it were, with “the matter”; he notably swerves from ventriloquizing the lass, preferring to emblazon her figure and to rechannel her music into his lines. This representation of listening and his insistence that we listen—“O listen!”—create an immediacy and a contemporaneity that Scott’s poems, with their scrupulously historicizing spectacle, abjure. Yet it is appropriate that, however different these poems, we recognize in them a haunting by questions raised by oral *poiesis*.

Perhaps, given the frequency with which oral communications become the stuff of Wordsworthian lyrics—with their enunciators witting or unwitting providers of “matter”—we should both revisit and revise the New Critical dictum. Wordsworth’s poems are often not so much poems about poetry as poems about the complex encounters between oral and literary *poiesis*. His most compact and penetrating exploration of oral-literate complexities—particularly those inhering in problems of textual mediation—may be found in the lyric he wrote as if to preface Macpherson’s Ossian poems, the most vexed and famous orally based texts of the period.

Binding Mediations and Orality Redux: Wordsworth's Ossian Unbound

“The Solitary Reaper” shows Wordsworth thinking about the textualization he represents himself as enacting. We might also bear in mind, as a further complication, what we know and what Wordsworth later acknowledged, that the poem was in a sense always pre-textualized, a manuscript its muse. Whether displayed or occluded, such textualizing operations were, of course, practices central to Romantic traffic with the oral. The major literary debates and scandals of the period—over the authenticity of Macpherson’s Ossian poems, for example, and indeed, over Scott’s later use of Coleridge’s “Christabel,” from which he derived license for his metrical and rhyming variousness and some lines in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*—revolved around questions of textualization and other appropriative, mediating practices: translating, editing, plagiarizing, and forging.

Wordsworth’s poem, “Written on a Blank Leaf of Macpherson’s Ossian,” proposes in its title that Wordsworth’s “lines” be taken as a continuation of as well as a supplement to Macpherson’s work. What has been left “blank” by Macpherson’s Ossian will be written in and over. The poem may be read as a commentary on the Ossian problematic, which Wordsworth astutely diagnoses as a problematic of poetry itself.

Wordsworth begins by offering natural similes as figures for poetic reception (1947:38; ll. 1-12):

Oft have I caught, upon a fitful breeze,
 Fragments of far-off melodies,
 With ear not coveting the whole,
 A part so charmed the pensive soul:
 While a dark storm before my sight
 Was yielding, on a mountain height
 Loose vapours have I watched, that won
 Prismatic colours from the sun;
 Nor felt a wish that Heaven would show
 The image of its perfect bow.
 What need, then, of these finished strains?
 Away with counterfeit remains!

Wordsworth naturalizes the process by which we receive poetry, particularly poetry that exists, like Ossian’s, only in “fragments.” Figuring the reception of poetic “fragments” as a kind of overhearing of “far-off melodies,” Wordsworth hovers between oral/aural and literate “strains” of poetry. The “fragment” here is positively valued, while “the whole” stands uncoveted.

In this astonishingly modulated and understated simile, Wordsworth pits an ethic and a poetic of the authentic fragment against, in a richly suggestive phrase, “counterfeit remains” (akin to the unsought rainbow). Macpherson’s “finished strains” appear in rhyme as they did, in Wordsworth’s opinion, in literary history—as “counterfeit remains.”

It is telling that the counterfeiter here, Macpherson, remains unnamed—as if he shall remain nameless. That there might be a fragment or partial remain of Ossian does, however, continue to intrigue Wordsworth, who boldly invokes Ossian as poet, having refused to name his translator/mediator (*ibid.*:38-39; ll. 17-30):

Spirit of Ossian! if imbound
 In language thou may’st yet be found,
 If aught (intrusted to the pen
 Or floating on the tongues of men,
 Albeit shattered and impaired)
 Subsist thy dignity to guard,
 In concert with memorial claim
 Of old gray stone, and high-born name,
 That cleaves to rock or pillared cave,
 Where moans the blast or beats the wave,
 Let Truth, stern arbitress of all,
 Interpret that original,
 And for presumptuous wrongs atone;
 Authentic words be given, or none!

In this central movement of the poem, Wordsworth shows himself thinking through—in incredibly concentrated lines—the oral-literate problematic that the Ossian controversy made into a famously debatable topic. In his apostrophe—“Spirit of Ossian!”—Wordsworth reopens the question of Ossian. He stringently dissociates the “spirit of Ossian” from the texts through which he supposedly is heard, that is, through Macpherson’s “translations.” Wordsworth’s apostrophe to Ossian’s spirit is a kind of dis-interral, a revivification, with a difference. Conjuring and appealing to his presence in a significantly conditional clause (“if imbound / In language thou may’st yet be found”), Wordsworth tellingly reverses the operation of textualization to which Macpherson had subjected Ossian: we might say that, in spiritualizing Ossian, rendering him a presence in nature, Wordsworth imaginatively reoralizes Ossian.

Wordsworth deftly represents several layers of mediation, presenting them in reverse order, as if peeling away the “counterfeit” layers to reach the ineffable, mysterious, and yet authentic core. Having dispensed with

Macpherson's "finished strains," Wordsworth further problematizes the question of any access to Ossian "in language." He recognizes that the problem of Ossian is, even aside from Macpherson, a problem of mediation. To consider whether Ossian "may'st yet be found" leads one to wonder whether he might be "intrusted to the pen / Or floating on the tongues of men, / Albeit shattered and impaired." The uncertainty of reference in this last apposition raises an intriguing question: is it the "tongues of men" that are "shattered and impaired," or the paltry "aught" (anything) one might still find, or indeed the "Spirit of Ossian" perhaps found "floating" there that is shattered?

The question of Ossian hinges, then, not only on "authentic words" but also on the state of men's tongues and the reliability of human mediations. One wonders how exactly one might ascertain the authenticity of "authentic words": original Ossianic words, could they be found or reconstructed, would be Gaelic; yet perhaps Wordsworth might have been satisfied by faithfully edited, fragmentary Ossianic translations, in which case "authentic words" would still be heavily mediated ones. Wordsworth traces very efficiently a romantic economy of poetic mediation and realization, ascending up several layers of artifactualization. The "spirit" appears as the raw material, the driving pulse, of poetry; it may be "imbound / in language"—this is the first, linguistic mediation of poetic spirit. It is notable that language itself appears here as a binding, a medium; this linguistic binding may be rendered orally (in the "tongues of men") or may be textualized ("intrusted to the pen"). Wordsworth privileges neither mode of transmission or fixing; he offers both, in a rapid parenthetical, as options. In the first movement of the poem, Wordsworth strenuously criticizes the distortions engendered by our longing for artifactual "wholes"—for "finished strains." But we see that it is not the *writing* of oral poetry that vexes Wordsworth; it is, rather, the obscuring of what may yet actually "subsist," whether in oral or written form.

It becomes apparent, as one rounds through the poem's arc, that Ossian serves as a case for lost poetry in general (*ibid.*:39; ll. 37-42):

No tongue is able to rehearse
 One measure, Orpheus! of thy verse;
 Musaeus, stationed with his lyre
 Supreme among the Elysian quire,
 Is, for the dwellers upon earth,
 Mute as a Lark ere morning's birth.

Ossian is thus the latest in a long line of poets whose “verses” are lost, no longer “rehearsable.” Only their names persist. Note that here Wordsworth explores the oral-poetic problematic as a problem not so much of *authorship* or *source* as of *poetic work*, most specifically the mediating work of cultural transmission. Here he foregrounds a different issue than he did, for example, in “Solitary Reaper,” where the “author” of the lass’s song—like those of most Anglo-Scots and Gaelic ballads—is presumably anonymous, lost in the mists of time: Wordsworth there confronts a mysterious song, a winsome singer, but no “original source,” and, more importantly, no problem of origination. In the case of Ossian, Musaeus, and Orpheus, however, we have names and not works, origins but no surviving poetic destinations. Yet Wordsworth’s catalogue of lost beauties leads him to a surprising interrogation (*idem*: ll. 43-47):

Why grieve for these, though past away
The Music, and extinct the Lay?
When thousands, by severer doom,
Full early to the silent tomb
Have sunk, at Nature’s call. . . .

Here, with stunning economy, Wordsworth both diagnoses the melancholy and longing that fueled the antiquarian/historicist project and counter-prescribes for it. If it was the desire to provide a national epic and a heroic, dignified past that fueled Macpherson, as well as Percy and Scott, this longing—however profound—should not, according to this poem, be indulged. In this remarkable passage Wordsworth moves beyond his stern critique of counterfeiting and false finishing to criticize the psychocultural impulses propelling that bad project. Again, he poses the crux of his critique as a question, for this is truly an interrogation of the “griefs” that lead men to create bad “memorials” (ll. 43-44):

Why grieve for these, though past away
The Music, and extinct the Lay?

Well, indeed, why grieve? To this Percy and Macpherson and Scott could have given extended, albeit differently inflected, responses. Yet Wordsworth objects to the emotional economy of antiquarian grief precisely because such grief privileges and fetishizes lost rarities—whether poets, poems, or musics—over vaster, unnamed human and poetic losses: “[T]housands, by severer doom, / Full early to the silent tomb / Have sunk.”

The poem then becomes a homage to and invocation of “Bards of mightier grasp!”—the “chosen few” who persisted, unsung, in their

vocation. In the closing lines of the poem, Wordsworth rounds back to the Ossian problematic that underlies the whole and provides a reconstructed poetic genealogy for British poetry. Imagining poets in all ages and climes comforting their fellow men, Wordsworth analogizes (*ibid.*:40; ll. 75-82):

Such, haply, to the rugged Chief
By fortune crushed, or tamed by grief,
Appears, on Morven's lonely shore,
Dim-gleaming through imperfect lore,
The Son of Fingal; such was blind
Maeonides of ampler mind;
Such Milton, to the fountain head
Of Glory by Urania led!

In these closing lines, Ossian is reclaimed and inserted into an ascending pantheon of poets whom Wordsworth addresses as his “Brothers in Soul!” In soul, we might add, but not in textual body. Even in these last lines Wordsworth keeps us alert to the problem of mediation: the final turn to Ossian—the “Son of Fingal”—is a conspicuously mediated apparition. He “appears, on Morven’s lonely shore, / Dim-gleaming through imperfect lore.” Not Ossian’s fragments but his spirit, not his historical, verifiable existence but his continued fame preserved and sustained through “imperfect lore”: Wordsworth ends his lines here, with the shadowy image of the barely and imperfectly mediated poet. Yet this Ossian, however shattered and impaired, is the poetically powerful Ossian. Converting Ossian into a muse rather than a source, proposing him as spiritual forebear rather than as fragmentary text, Wordsworth reaches an uneasy reconciliation with Ossian, whose influence he would elsewhere furiously and improbably deny.²⁰

Again, what is remarkable here is not only the turn to Ossian, and to the oral-literate problematic surrounding his purported works, but the terms and lines through which Wordsworth thinks and renders that problematic. Transmission, oral or not, and textualization are the cruxes of this poem, and more broadly for any poet intent on a rigorous engagement with dubious but compelling “remains.”

²⁰ See Wordsworth’s extraordinary attack (1974:78): “Yet, much as those pretended treasures of antiquity [Macpherson’s Ossian poems] have been admired, they have been wholly uninfluential upon the literature of the Country. No succeeding writer appears to have caught from them a ray of inspiration; no author, in the least distinguished, has ventured formally to imitate them—except the boy, Chatterton, on their first appearance.”

Such a poem allows us to rethink certain critical insights about Romanticism: for example, that it was preoccupied with notions of “spirit” and transcendence; that it privileged a discourse of inspiration over imitation; that it developed a poetics of the fragment. These general propositions seem true enough, especially for poets like Wordsworth who often employed vatic strains. But perhaps we could refine these propositions by considering them, as it were, in an oral key: in such a poem as Wordsworth’s on Ossian, we see that his commitment to the fragment rests on a complex theorization of literate mediations of the oral as well as on a nod to ongoing oral mediations (e.g. “tongues of men,” “imperfect lore”). We also see that the invocation of Spirit is no transparent operation: the apostrophe—perhaps the stereotypical Romantic trope (O wild west wind, O Derwent, and so on)—immediately propels a conditional clause (“if imbound . . .”) and parenthetical options (e.g., possible preservation by tongues or pen). With their qualifications and clarifications, Wordsworth’s lines scrupulously enact the difficulty we have in “getting,” not to mention “getting to,” Ossian.

Wordsworth’s poem allows us to see that there is no Ossian, and indeed no poetry, without mediation, whether oral or literate. One can only discriminate among kinds of mediation and kinds of remains (“counterfeit” or authentic). All poetry depends, however regrettably, on binding mediations. In a stunning paradox, it is through the rhetoric of immediate access, of unimpeded inspiration—“Spirit of Ossian!”—that Wordsworth most cannily argues his point: no poetry without mediation.

Orality Interminable: The Oral Turn in Contemporary Poetry

Representing orality means theorizing orality. For Romantic literary poets, representing orality required a confrontation with the cultural situation and historicity of poetry. Was oral poetry dead? If “oral poetry” meant “minstrelsy,” sung by trained minstrels to Scottish aristocrats, as in Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, then yes. If “oral poetry” meant “popular poetry,” as Scott has it in the “Introduction to Popular Poetry” prefacing his *Border Minstrelsy*, then no, oral poetry was not at all dead: the contents of the *Minstrelsy*, Scott frequently notes, were often taken “from the mouths” of contemporary singers and reciters. Was oral poetry a viable inheritance for literate poets? Again, the question has no one answer: for Scott, immersed in as well as cultivating and commodifying Border song-culture, there was a vital continuity from his edition of *The Border Minstrelsy* to his first “original work,” the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Yet Scott’s relation to Border

lore and Border poetry may be read, to borrow terms from Schiller, as a relation of the sentimental to the naïve. Conspicuous in Scott's works are his mediating, ironizing, historicizing hand and voice. On the question of viable encounters with orality, moreover, Wordsworth's work also reveals a profound recognition of a barrier—whether linguistic, cultural, or educational—between the modern, literate, publishing poet and what he represents as his oral contemporaries. The drama of Wordsworth's poems often arises from his represented recognition of just such a barrier. His poems offer a savoring of such impasse, even as he strains to transcend it: as he asks, concerning the Highland lass's enigmatic song: “will no one tell me what she sings?”

I would argue that the romantic encounter with orality—its complex representations of and debts to oral poetry, its exploration of song-culture and traditional forms like the ballad, its privileging of ethnographic authority as a poetic resource, its focus on mediation—inaugurated a long imaginative exchange that we are still witnessing. It is striking that, however different their poems, aims, and commitments, poets as diverse as Scott, Wordsworth, Thomas Moore, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge understood their balladry to be both innovations and interventions in what they saw as a moribund poetic state. Their work presents the by now familiarly paradoxical face of many modern literary movements: they strove, in Ezra Pound's words, to “make it new,” and did so by reviving and reworking what they saw as the old, the traditional, the popular, the naïve. Among the traditional things ready for reworking was oral poetry, which from one angle seemed decidedly past, and yet from another was everywhere around them, in the popular ballads they knew from childhood, or the songs their grandfathers knew, or tales carried in the minds of vagrants they might encounter on the public way, or tunes sung by their nurses.

This paradoxical movement, of literary revivification through the romance of orality, persists in contemporary experimental poetry, albeit in newly mediated forms.²¹ We can debate, as critics have on the front page of *The New York Times*, whether rap is poetry; leaving aside that revealingly vexed and racialized controversy, we find in the heart of high-cultural

²¹ For an excellent recent collection of essays discussing poetry, performance, and the cultural and linguistic politics of contemporary *poiesis*, see Bernstein 1998. Particularly relevant to this discussion are the contributions of Bob Perelman (“Speech Effects: The Talk as a Genre,” 200-16) and Ron Silliman (“Afterword: Who Speaks: Ventriloquism and the Self in the Poetry of Reading,” 360-78).

American poetry a telling turn toward the oral and toward theories of the oral.

David Antin, for example, has set himself the task of becoming a post-literate performance poet, a truly improvisational poet who comes to events, he claims, with no prepared text, just the readiness to talk, to perform, and to be open to the occasion. Evoking aspects of comic monologue, confessional poem, jazz improvisation, free association, and obsessional diatribe, his pieces are intriguing examples of a reconstructed orality used to jump-start contemporary poetry.²² Antin is, moreover, extremely self-reflexive in his pieces, meditating explicitly on his compositional choices and the stakes of his poetic gambits. In his introduction to “a public occasion in a private place,” published in *Postmodern American Poetry*, Antin notes that he had been called to do a reading (1994:230):

*i had to explain that i wasn't doing any reading any
more or not at that time anyway that i went to a
place and talked to an occasion and that was the only
kind of poetry i was doing now but if that was all
right with them id like to read with jackson maclow*

Antin thus announces a reading involving no reading, a reading in which “reading” becomes the name not for the practice of reading out words from books or manuscripts but rather for the occasion itself, an occasion that, he proudly declares in his opening lines, is unmediated by books, text, print, or writing (1994:231):

i consider myself a poet but im not reading poetry as you see
i bring no books with me thought ive written books i
have a funny relationship to the idea of reading if you cant hear
i would appreciate it if youd come closer

Swerving here from “the idea of reading” to the problem of hearing, Antin gestures explicitly to the audience. This gesture is both an interactive solicitation—a thing said to the audience concerning the audience—and a theoretical proposition (*ibid.*):

²² For an illuminating discussion of Antin and the stakes of his work, see Perloff 1981. Perloff reads Antin’s exploratory *poiesis* as specially engaged with “opsis,” that is, with spectacle (289): “Performance . . . is, by definition, an art form that involves *opsis*: it establishes a unique relationship between artist and audience.”

i came here in order to make a
 poem talking to talk a poem which it will be all
 other things being equal

“To make a poem” is now “to talk a poem”; what he is doing is making as he goes, on his feet. Antin’s *poiesis* is obviously a highly sophisticated meditation on *poiesis* as well as an apparently free-form “talk.” Antin goes so far as to announce the death of all poetry that is not, as he claims his is, “complete improvisation”; this extreme pronouncement he then quickly and characteristically reworks (*idem*:234):

ive
 said you cant possibly make a poem that isnt a complete improvi-
 sation say or something like that and then i figured as
 soon as i said it a week later i made exactly the opposite kind of
 poem because as soon as you take a position very forcefully
 youre immediately at the boundary of that position

Antin constantly invokes the implicit contract between poet and audience, revising the contract as he names it (*idem*:236):

. . . youre here at a private experience in a public
 place its what one expects of a poet isn’t it?

Antin’s semi-serious characterization of poetry as a typically “private experience” relies on a literate, literary, bourgeois conception of poetry, in which poems are imagined as intimate, written, page-bound communications read alone, in silence, in private. Using oral performance to confound the literate conventions associated with poetic experience, Antin explores the social situation of poetry, its “place,” its status as “private” or “public.” Antin has undertaken as a kind of meta-performance poetry a *poiesis* obviously informed by a deep literary sophistication that nevertheless privileges—or claims to privilege—the “composition-in-performance” one associates with oral poetry. Yet however much he has recourse to the oral, Antin’s performance poetry is not, to be sure, the “saying of the same again” of traditional oral poetry: his works are not re-creations but rather one-time-only improvisations. And we can see that, by allowing the printing and anthologizing of transcriptions of his poem-talks, Antin also embraces—notwithstanding his avoidance of conventional capitalization and punctuation—the same means of mediation and transmission as his more text-oriented, literary-minded peers. The contradictions of Antin’s project are obvious, and not least to Antin, who revels in paradox.

For another exploration of the contemporary uses of orality, we might look at Jerome Rothenberg’s manifesto, “New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance,” first presented in 1977.²³ Just as our understanding of oral poetry and performance has been illuminated by the conversation between philologists and anthropologists, so too we see Rothenberg turning to anthropologists of ritual, notably Victor Turner, in an attempt to imagine a new, postmodern poetic practice free from literary constraints (640):

The model—or better, the vision—has shifted: away from a “great tradition” centered in a single stream of art and literature in the West, to a *greater* tradition that includes, sometimes as its central fact, preliterate and oral cultures throughout the world, with a sense of their connection to subterranean but literate traditions in civilizations both East and West.

Outlining this new paradigm, Rothenberg calls for the dissolution of the artwork, for an emphasis on process over product, and for the disappearance of the distinction between artist and audience. On this last point, he notes, “the tribal/oral is a particularly clear model, often referred to by the creators of 1960s happenings and the theatrical pieces that invited, even coerced, audience participation toward an ultimate democratization of the arts” (643). Again, what is important here is Rothenberg’s telling impulse to find in the “tribal/oral” an alternative to Western high-cultural models of art-making.

If it was the Romantics who first conceptualized the idea of “poet-as-informant,” the postmoderns continue to find it compelling. Rothenberg, for example, makes a polemical, volatile analogy in the closing paragraphs of his essay, styling his new-modeled poet as a post-literate, native informant (644):

The model switch is here apparent. But in addition the poet-as-informant stands in the same relation to those who speak of poetry or art from outside the sphere of its making as do any of the world’s aboriginals. The antagonism to literature and to criticism is, for the poet and artist, no different from that to anthropology, say, on the part of the Native American militant. It is a question in short of the right to self-definition.

It is by now a cliché that such avant-garde announcements of the death of art and literature are accompanied by an exaltation of the “primitive,” the collective, and, more important for our purposes, the oral. We observe here, as we can in eighteenth-century writing, a characteristic blurring of these

²³ Now published in Hoover 1994:640-44. Further quotations from the essay will be cited in text from this source.

terms into one another. Such an extended, if confused, analogy reveals how politically and ethically problematic the turn to the oral can be. In his great drive to liberate artists from the shackles of convention, critical apparatus, elitism, and commodification, Rothenberg turns to his fantasy of pre-capitalist, communitarian societies and ritual practices. In doing so, his rhetoric ultimately lapses in its grotesque elision of actual aboriginal and Native American claims, histories, and predicaments. One could discuss such moments in this and other essays under the title “On the Use and Abuse of the Oral Native for Art.”

Rothenberg is focusing here on poetics, of course, at a particular moment in the late 1970s: yet his manifesto has clearly become a synecdoche for those interested in constructing a postmodern canon, however quixotic such a venture may be. And Rothenberg has been for decades a prominent and hugely influential compiler, translator, anthologist, and advocate of various world poetics and alternative poetics;²⁴ poetics for him merges into the making of culture, and the democratization of culture, thereby involving art-making in a political and ethical project. But Rothenberg’s analogy raises an interesting, disquieting issue for students and theorists of so-called oral cultures, poetics, and peoples, whom we almost inevitably approach from the literate, capitalized side of the oral/literate boundary. If natives should be wary of anthropologists, should oral poets have been wary, say, of Milman Parry, or Alan Lomax?

What is notable, for our purposes, is the continuation of the romance of orality in this manifesto housed within the typeset, mass-produced pages of *Postmodern American Poetry*. Postmodern poets, even more than their romantic forebears, invoke orality as a mode of critique: it reveals what most prevailing poetry *is not*, what it lacks, what it needs; it shows the way, for these poets, to a new consideration of performance, language, and relation to audience.

As this necessarily brisk survey suggests, the romance of orality has proven to be surprisingly resilient, persisting through the birth of new media and the concomitant reorganization of old. Many of us—scholars, critics, and poets—long ago internalized a concept of poetry founded on the hegemony of print and the ideal of the fixed, perfected, replicable artifact. It

²⁴ Among his many contributions, alongside his own volumes of poetry, are *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (1985), *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant Garde Poetry, 1914-1945* (1974), and an important recent anthology, co-edited with Pierre Joris: *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry* (Rothenberg and Joris 1995-98).

seems unavoidably true that, as Walter J. Ong has suggested, we now live in a world governed by secondary orality—in which the oral/aural domain, newly mediated and amplified by electronic and digital technologies, has displaced the primacy of text and print.²⁵ Whether oral or literate or hovering in the twilight zone between the two, poetry has always been, in the first instance, an art of language. The vitality of poetry will surely continue to depend on this ongoing negotiation between a history of linguistically based traditions—whether “oral” or not—and an embrace of new media.²⁶

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²⁵ Ong discusses “secondary orality” (as opposed to the “primary orality” of peoples untouched by writing) in light of Marshall MacLuhan’s notion of the “global village”—the mass-mediated group-consciousness promoted by electronic, and now digital, media. See Ong 1982:136-37.

²⁶ This essay developed in conversation with several friends and colleagues: in addition to acknowledging my debt to their thinking and support, I would like to thank Ann Rowland for directing me back to Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper” and to Peter Manning’s essay on the poem (1990); Celeste Langan for sharing her stimulating work on Walter Scott (2001); and Laura Slatkin for commenting on and improving every version of this essay and for her illuminating discussions of *poiesis*.

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