



SECTION II

ORALITY AND LITERATURE

Introduction

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Everything in Latin America involves language: power and freedom, domination and hope. Yet although the language of barbarity wishes to subject us to the linear determinism of time, the language of imagination seeks to destroy that fatality by freeing the simultaneous spaces of what is real.

(Carlos Fuentes 58)

In the past, orality was regarded as primitive, as folklore, or as the merely popular, in contrast to written texts, whereas today historians and social scientists are aware of the need to recover the richness of oral traditions as a part of history. It is difficult to ignore the paradox that historiography (in other words, historical writing) is a combination of two antonymous terms: that is, knowing and writing (Certeau 58). Because the potential intelligibility of the past undoubtedly lies in the space between doing and saying, the permanent link between social action and historical speech therefore determines the various kinds of new directions in the humanities and social sciences. Saying displays the variations of sensations, experiences, and even fiction that stand behind the written narrative with its great historical significance. Consequently, the relationship between the word and the world concerns not only linguistics or poetics but a wide range of social disciplines, including history, which attempt to explore the relationships between discourse as action and the “universe of discourse” (Jakobson 349)—in other words, the problem of the relationship between words and the world.

When social scientists study language in an interdisciplinary fashion, they find over and over again that language and culture are inextricably linked and that language, whether oral or written, can be conceived only as a social product. In this respect, popular culture is primarily expressed in oral language, which, from the moment it is written down, transcends symbolic representation and becomes a document, an instrument in creating history. It is a commonplace to observe that writing precedes history and orality comes before writing, but what is often overlooked is that, at the end of the twentieth century, the majority of the world’s languages exist only in the spoken form (Kress 65). Carlos Fuentes has pointed out that “adopting a radical position towards their own past, Latin American writers undertake a review on the basis of evidence: the lack of a language. The old obligation to make denunciations becomes a far more complex task: the critical elaboration of everything that is not said in our history of lies, silence, rhetoric, and academic complicity. Inventing a language involves saying everything that history has kept secret. A continent of sacred texts, Latin America feels an urgent need for a profanation that will express four centuries of a

sequestered, marginalized, and unknown language. This resurrection of a lost language requires a diversity of verbal explorations, which is one of the signs of the health of today’s Latin American novel” (58).

The case of Latin America is undoubtedly significant, both because of the richness of its pre-Columbian cultures and because of the dogged attitude of its peoples in redefining and reinforcing the value of their orality. It would be difficult to explain contemporary Latin American literature without the ingredient of these multiple forms of orality, which become constant witnesses and, indeed, protagonists. Many American peoples have managed to preserve and defend their worldviews, so different and remote from those imposed by homogenizing European and Eurocentric political rule, precisely on the basis of both particular forms of orality and their own languages. Indeed, the survival of multiple cultures is based on their distinct ways of life, their understanding of nature, and the transmission of their values and beliefs through their original literatures, handed down orally from generation to generation.

Over a decade ago, Paul Verdevoye pointed out the obvious: a close relationship that exists in Latin America between literature and the realities of the environment (45–46). In this respect, the influence of orality on literary culture has been considerable, as the recovery of testimonies has had an impact on the written literature of these countries. Folklore, history, and geography are crucial elements for the understanding of orality. In the sphere of Latin American literature, both fiction and the re-creation of everyday reality abound in local phraseology, old wives’ tales, vendors’ cries, proverbs, popular tales, and various forms of narrativity that reflect the creative individuality and pluralism of the multiple and varied forms of Latin American literature. One outstanding feature is the richness and diversity of its myths, which teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, help to reveal the ways communities function, and provide the *raison d’être* for their beliefs, customs, and institutions. In short, myths serve to define a certain *modus operandi* of the human spirit, “so constant over the centuries and so widespread that they can be regarded as fundamental, meaning that one can search for them in other societies” (Lévi-Strauss 577).

This is how the inventiveness and thought of the producers of various literary genres, whether essays, novels, short stories, or poetry, are formed. All of them contain an underlying partial and perhaps unconscious discourse, reflecting the ideology of the author and the author's community and providing a glimpse of the common discursive universe with which he or she identifies, through an elementary sense of belonging. The individual or collective imagination investigates and probes into an unusual common cultural heritage; at the same time, it reinstates the natural ambiguity of language. A propos of this exploitation of natural polysemy, one has to distinguish the role of literature as a historical source (White 1992). Since we know that all texts have a certain degree of subjectivity, we should accept the fact that literary works can also serve as a form of representation in which one can observe spaces, times, personages, and persons involved in purportedly human action that could have been, although it may never have been.

The combined forces of history, anthropology, and ethnology are means through which one can recover orality (understood as a substantial element in the construction of historical memory) and therefore accept the intimate relationship between oral narration and what Unamuno called *intra-historia*, the history of everyday matters, the day-to-day struggle, the unimportant facts, on the basis of which various individual or collective-social paths are taken. This aim goes hand in hand with the need to emphasize the *long duration* (to borrow a term from Braudel) of this type of history compared with the history punctuated by events as the sole referents of historical narrative. By observing and analyzing the ways of thinking and behaving inscribed in language use and ignoring the rhetoric imposed on them, the interpretation of the various modes of discourse, whether oral or written, acquires more clarity.

It would seem then that silence can become direct expression, that those with no written history did indeed conquer their own spaces, and that a new kind of history is possible, one that gets rid of monumental deeds, depersonalized events, the great actions of heroes, and, consequently, also the great failures. The aim is not to avoid the narrative of events, but to recover everything that contributes to solid reflections on the exploratory, analytical, and expressive functions of historical constants. The Annales school in Paris has contributed major studies in this line, and in these volumes we aim to do the same for the literary cultures of Latin America.

One of the distinctive features of contemporary history is that it is based on the existence and experience of witnesses of the events studied, thereby forcing the historian to be vigilant and alert, waiting to see what will happen when historical events are contextualized. Indeed, not only is every written text, every essay, every publication subjected to the criticism and judgment of the scientific community to which it belongs, but the protagonists of the historical events being recorded can discuss the emerging historical record, having the advantage of their presence at the time of the occurrence of the events, and can contribute to the debate on what really happened. There is therefore a double requirement for the historian, because representing historical events effectively means proposing "a past whose material and mental reality cannot be fully reconstructed, and recognizing the historian's individual intelligibility which arranges a set of events so as to give them meaning. But it also means having to tell the *truth*, in the awareness that it is only possible to approach

truthfulness (*one* form of truth), which is above all, but not only, the discursive and rational part of the past" (Voldman 80).

The verbal source of the accounts of ordinary life compels historians to acknowledge that there are other perspectives and responsibilities than those that prevailed in the written accounts of the past. The importance of all this lies in being able to choose the participatory level at which one wishes to remain and in knowing the reasons and limitations, the nature and consequences of one's choices. The need then arises to intercede on behalf of *that other history*, which, in the case of Latin American countries, is based on instruments that are better suited to their local idiosyncrasy and thus adapted to national specificities and tasks rather than to any universal precepts. To some extent, these instruments have begun to gather up the loose threads of the dense fabric created by the Amerindian informants who shared their knowledge with the evangelizers and conquerors, thereby vindicating the oral tradition of their peoples by transcribing the original history of Mesoamerica. These instruments were used to gather information from peasants and workers, ordinary men and women; they attempt to restore numerous connections between the economic structures and ideological and legal-political infrastructures from which different interpretations can be made of the historical process of this century.

Jan Vansina emphasizes the coherence of the oral tradition among the peoples of Africa; the history of Latin America also draws on its oral cultural heritage, handed down from generation to generation. We should also stress the conscious efforts by Latin American peoples continuously to revalue and enrich their oral history; these efforts protect and defend the oral tradition behind written history—always tinged by the partiality and subjectivity of the clergy, who have insisted on preserving it without having been totally faithful to the original version. Narrating events is an inherent part of human nature. We narrate, communicate, preserve, invent, diversify, modify, and enrich knowledge; we unburden ourselves; and from these multiple sources history is constructed by the historian. Oral literature can be conceived as a collective creation in the sense that, regardless of its authorship, spoken discourse is appropriated by its receivers, who decode the message the moment it is received, in accordance with their personal and subjective way of understanding what has been narrated, so that they in turn become the senders of a new discourse, and so on.

Walter J. Ong, commenting on Homeric Greek culture, observes: "In an oral culture knowledge once acquired had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (24). Anyone familiar with the Mesoamerican oral tradition and its transcriptions into writing during the early Colonial period will recognize the full applicability of these comments to New Spain. It is ironic indeed that humanist Spain, which so idealized ancient Greece, would be the instrument of intolerance toward and destruction of much of the Amerindian oral tradition. When discourse is printed, and therefore fixed, a specific phenomenon takes place; by effectively eliminating the physical presence and the act of appropriation that the receiver performs in oral transmission, printing also cancels out the possibilities of remaking the past by turning the receiver into a sender of knowledge.

There are other basic characteristics of the oral tradition that are lost or radically changed in a written culture. The oral text displays a structure of addition of data, unlike written

structures with their predilection for principal and subordinate information. The oral text tends to be aggregative and redundant, more concerned with conserving than with innovating; knowledge is considered precious. An oral tradition will thus place high value on the skill of old men and women who specialize in conserving the past and in telling the stories that are foundational to the community. The written text can and often does completely transcend the time and place of composition and is therefore incomplete in a way that an oral text within its community can never be. Thus, in its written form, literary creation becomes a highly individual, personal process both for writer and reader, and through it, originality becomes much more important than in an oral tradition. Conversely, in a written culture such as ours, anonymous, collective creation that is transmitted orally becomes devalued and marginalized. Thus, original, oral, formulaic production, which once maintained a permanent link between producer and receiver, is pushed into the background, regarded as belonging to the anonymous masses, and condemned to disappear as ephemeral. Current scholarship contradicts this opinion, for oral literature is today regarded as an ongoing cultural phenomenon, representative of Latin American national majorities, a fact that has prevented it from being considered subliterate. We should, however, realize that the very nature of oral literature hinders its study; as a result, very few compilations of oral texts have been published that take their peculiar features into account and treat them as literary creations. It is therefore essential not only to study oral literature closely but to reconsider its place within Latin American cultures (Mariscal 343–54).

Oral literature reflects an inheritance that is constantly renewed in transmission and grows, enriched by the community's historical knowledge—interpreting, judging, analyzing, and thereby incorporating current events. Its most recurrent themes include stories with a mythical element that explain a people's origins or sanction the behavior of community members. Some contain tales of the adventures of people who are clearly identified with the community itself, as preserved through testimonial stories that refer to everyday practices and activities, everyday history as expressed in poems, songs, and *corridos*. Raphael Samuel used to say that the aim of popular history was “to bring the limits of history closer to people's lives” (15). The historian's attention generally used to focus on structures and technology, favoring political events and ignoring reflections about the general population, unless assumed by an epic national tradition. Indeed, from the 1920s, attempts have been made to broaden the basis of history, increase the scope of its study, use new materials, and offer new maps of knowledge. This broader conception associated with Bloch, Braudel, and the Annalists constitutes an alternative to traditional political history, which was consistently transmitted through structured discourse, with the inevitable ideological bias that reflected the interests of the particular group in power.

This is the background to the recovery of the oral tradition—life stories, testimonies, and multiple forms of orality, understood as a means of giving coherence to the spontaneous tales of protagonists as everyday individuals with commonly felt desires. What is valued in the oral tradition is the depiction of the times in the life of each individual and the significance of these times in collective history. The triad of orality, oral tradition, and life stories spans the entire range of cultural expression, for every society is determined by its

collective experiences. Thus these refer to communal life, education, art, communication, everyday matters, attitudes and, more recently, in keeping with modernity, ideologies and gender issues. They therefore emphasize the cyclical nature of social life, its general features, and its close relationship to the repetition of these acts in a social system. What is surprising is the frequency with which they occur, regardless of the accuracy with which they are observed or described (Barth 1969). In this respect, the question of hierarchy and equality, similarity and differences, becomes particularly important. Recovering, safeguarding, and preserving direct and personal testimony, on the basis of life stories, heuristically recovering the inherited baggage of the oral tradition, of the so-called *peoples without history*, and incorporating them into the narrated histories of ordinary men and women and anonymous protagonists—such is the function of orality in Latin America. Attempting, in short, on the basis of words and silences, emotions and tears, to catch a glimpse, perhaps as intruders, of our own otherness. Thus it is that we perceive the interaction between the voice of the oral narrator and the listener.

Our work in this history of literary culture starts with the deconstruction of memory, whether individual or collective, in order to reconstruct history in a scholarly adventure in which geography, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology join forces to compile an integral history in which time and space are regarded as fundamental elements. I am referring here to the proposal articulated by the General Editors, Valdés and Hutcheon, understood as a means of raising the multiple fabrications of the past to a conscious critical level that will permit what we could call the verbalization of writing, thereby evoking a means of philosophizing, a style of political thought, and a form of criticism and analysis, or to borrow Derrida's idea that truth is, in the last analysis, a changing, unclaimed exchange of messages, with no origin or addressee (Derrida 1980). By unleashing this memory and discovering reminiscences, one advances along three essential paths: the path of identification with collective and individual symbols; the path of the specification of the dynamics, causes, ruptures, and manipulations and of the reconfirmation of memories in a narrative that assumes its complicity with what is believed or imagined, what is recreated or told; and, finally, the path that attempts to narrate what is to be preserved.

There are certainly differences between the happening of an event and the memory of it; but how can one describe an event without involving individual and collective recollections? How can one stop time and depict an event as complete? Indeed, unleashing memory and bringing it to the surface become in themselves the initial actions of constructing history.

Recovering oral sources for literature sometimes assumes a subordinate, auxiliary function to documentary evidence; but, like the latter, oral testimony should meet the criteria of reliability, representation, and documentation. At the start of the twenty-first century, we recognize that “Historians work over significations—discourse—already achieved, already ideologized, their collective acts determined by the maintenance of the historian's privilege: that the form of story is compatible with every mode of intellection, yet transcendent to critical thought” (Cohen 326).

The historical past of a literature as recorded in national literary histories is often full of a false loftiness that can be demythologized only through an exhaustive analysis of ideological

and social processes. In contrast to a version of the past determined by “the interests of power, and therefore mutilated, censored, deformed, the masses provide a more solid image, an image befitting their aspirations and one which reflects the real richness of their past” (Chesneaux 40). Our collective aim in these volumes is therefore to approach literary culture as broadly as possible. Indeed, the aim in the first half of the twentieth century was to create a critical front to oppose positivist historicism and to seek a genuinely effective relationship with other social disciplines in order to reinforce a comparative approach. One should also note, albeit in passing, the experience of the historian who, when faced with living sources, feels compelled to take unexpected positions and even recognize passions, and ultimately to *question* history. It is therefore a question of experience and one that is profoundly human. Literary history must also make room for documents from experience, in addition to historical analysis.

There is no such thing as an innocent historian or an unbiased history, just as there are no innocent readers; we are never removed from the reality that surrounds us. In short, distrust of theoretical proposals, like that of a comparative literary history, immediately comes up against a critical and personal position that challenges theory and experience. Hence the development of a freer form of history, whose interpretive function must be permanently subjected to experimentation and rational scrutiny. The danger of the researcher’s naïveté or passionate romantic defense of causes continues to persist, as does the certainty that objectivity cannot be achieved and that partiality is permanent. If this were not the case, then history would be meaningless, and literary history would be a mere catalogue of names and works.

Every day, we experience having to cope with all kinds of sources. Some we locate, others we discover, and others we have often been forced to create. We should not forget that all these sources have an underlying ideological bias and a political aim, and it is precisely here that one should embark on the unavoidable task of deconstructing individual and collective memory in order to construct the history of literary culture. The uses and abuses of memory, the historical formulations after the fashion of ideologies and false consciences, cannot be avoided. However, if the historian’s aim is not to serve as a channel for predetermined political interests but rather to rescue various voices and expressions from oblivion, then we shall be able to recognize the multiple crossroads and options offered by this deconstruction of memory. We should no doubt rethink the idea that “history is for analyzing the present better, so that we can design a better future” (Fontana 143), because the old formulae in which we had deposited our hopes have been disproved. The long path taken during the second half of the twentieth century, following the influence of new forms of history (or rather new forms of conceiving history) and new specializations (economic, political and social history, not to mention macro- and micro-histories, as well as the -isms of historicism, scientism, positivism, Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and even postmodern revisionism) has proved the need to return to the old task of proposing a history free of dogmatism, one that will abandon ties with any type of catechism, in short, as Mercedes Vilanova has said, “a history without adjectives” (95).

The use of testimonies as a representation of memory, the confrontation between stories and personal and collective memories (understood either as a natural elaboration or as a

political construction, at set times or under set circumstances) reveals a series of conditions, options, and intentions, as well as needs, that have been arranged and constructed on the basis of specific interests. The aim, then, is to discover the origin and guiding thread of these representations in order to understand or discover the self-serving apologies of authority hidden in these processes.

Here we should also meditate on the artificial nature of recreating the versions we recover from the past, and the loss of the original aim of the person who first transmitted them. Who wishes to tell us something, and how far is he prepared to reveal himself? What do we hear and what do we want to hear? How do we feel gratified by these stories that comprise the historical story of a community’s identity?

The intimate relationship between memory, time, and history finds its greatest expression in stories that, whether oral or written, become literary expression. To a certain extent, lived reality becomes the essence of narrative discourse, whether mythical, historical, or fictional (see White). If memory fades and time inexorably places a particular slant on events, the need to recover this permanent inheritance of the word and communication in its most pristine form suggests orality’s multiple relations. In the simplest gestures—the sound of a drum, wind instruments that exhale expression and sentiment, rudimentary poems, litanies, couplets, *corridos*—or even in certain refined poetic forms, we find the basis of that orality that allows us to travel back and forth through time for the sake of a common history. This underscores the permanent link between history and literature as a constant theme of historical work, in order to establish an overall theory that will incorporate language through narrative discourse and temporality (Ricoeur 1995). It is Paul Ricoeur who underlines the importance of the framework, understood as a sequence of scattered events that configure symbolic representation, through the language of the experience of time.

In its earliest version, namely orality, narrative allows historians, who rarely come face to face with their object of analysis, to reconstruct an event or a series of situations and grants them the unusual privilege of interrogating the document, making it speak, and perhaps meeting it, in order to throw a “working hypothesis at it” (Ricoeur 1990, 25). Thus historians first attempt to understand what has happened, in order to satisfy themselves and then be able to explain it to others. The point is that all this is achieved within the sphere of verbal expression, through words. Orality therefore acquires another dimension, consolidating its permanent and indissoluble link with history. It would not be feasible to return to the idea of a narrative history of literary culture, presented as a neutral form of explanation, devoid of any ideological bias. The alternative aim that governs the present work is to recover various forms of discourse, expressed as perspectives of individual memory, such as the identification and changing dimensionality of historical subjects, in order to enable the deconstruction of collective memory to recover the inherent plurality and heterogeneity of history. Nor can we assume that the historian’s task is reduced to offering a linear, orderly explanation. The historian should instead seek the hybridity provided by a coherent summary of politics, society, and literary culture, acknowledging that the protagonists are flesh-and-blood creations. This is where the pluralistic richness of orality comes into its own. In this respect, as one can see, we have come a long way from the original age of innocence to the current state of historical research.

The point, then, is to avoid futile attempts at finding arguments to defend the recovery of testimonies, and to stop hiding behind our uncompromising support of the recovery of orality as the ultimate goal of our commitment as historians. We should not allow the trees to obscure the forest of possibilities and intentions in the alterable and renewable course of history. Ambition should not trick us into thinking that we can achieve total, absolute knowledge. For, as Ricoeur wrote, indeed, the point is to listen to alternative forms of subjectivity, reappraising conditions, events, and circumstances in order to process individual and collective memories and their political uses and embark on the task of creating a history of literary culture in movement, inasmuch as it is and continues to be a humanistic discipline. The aim, in short, is to attempt to create another type of history, one that is multiple, diverse, polyphonic, and complex, and which strives to recover the richness of orality. Such, then, is the underlying aim of the work of those who took part in the adventure of recovering or deconstructing this part of literature, which includes some of its prehistory and some of its destiny, namely orality. Indeed, as Roland Barthes notes, there is no place "without language, one cannot contrast language, whether verbal or merely verbose, with a pure, appropriate space that would be the sphere of what is real and truth, a space outside language. Everything is language, or rather, language is everywhere. It runs through reality; there is no reality without language" (Barthes 168).

And if language is reality, recovering this sense of the real obliges historians and critics alike to search its origins. To do this, we suggest a type of geography that befits our aims: in other words, an undoubtedly subjective but transparent and rational formal order that would enable us to regard orality on the basis of its roots. Thus, our focus spans five major areas: Mesoamerica, the Caribbean, the Andean high plateau, the far south of the continent, and Brazil. Through it, we have attempted to trace the development that spread from Mexico to the Central American countries, while observing the experience of blacks and their influence on both the Caribbean mainland and its islands; we have explored the high plateau, where we sought to recover the Andean experience, before returning to the path that enabled us to reflect on orality in the far south of the continent, in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina; our journey ends in the rich and varied experience of Brazil. Our overall goal was obviously to present an overview of the origin, the reason behind, and the meaning of our natural orality, its performance, permanence, and survival, as well as its profound, indissoluble links as a source of inspiration, as a protagonist of contemporary Latin American literature, in order to create and tell a new and different history.

Whether said or written, words advance, and are written one after another in their own space: a sheet of paper, a wall of air. They wander hither and thither, following a path: they slip by, like time. . . . There is no beginning, nor end, everything is the center. There is no before or after, no forward or backward, no outside or inside: everything lies within everything else. (Paz 133)

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