

Reading aloud as Interface between Written and Oral Literatures in Britain, Ireland and Kenya

André Kaboré

Département d'Etudes Anglophones,
Université Ouaga 1 Pr. Joseph Ki-Zerbo
Burkina Faso

Abstract

Literary criticism, especially in Europe, has not sufficiently shown and acknowledged the reciprocal interaction between oral and written traditions. Though it is easy to believe, with the theory of new historicism, that early written literature took over material from oral literature, the passage from print literature to the oral tradition rarely comes to consideration. The objective of this paper is, using the theory of orature, to show, with the examples of the works by Charles Dickens, William Carleton and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o that went from written literature to oral literature, that reading aloud serves as a process in went back to oral literature through. It is hoped that the realisation of the oral appropriation of printed literature in this process will change our approach to it and lead us to develop it as an alternative form of literary acquisition that is more efficient in some contexts.

Key words: Reading, interface, oral literature, print, orature, literary criticism.

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, orality has been devalued in the scholarly world in favour of literacy. Walter Ong for example observes that "the study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamoured for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as (...) beneath serious scholarly attention" (Ong, 2012: 8). The tendency has been to separate orality from writing as if the two have nothing in common. In our super-literate world, it is indeed often tempting to project our solitary ways of reading and evaluating literature to other centuries and to assess earlier writings as if they were written only for solo-readers. However, written texts are in close relationship to the world of sound to yield their meanings. This study reminds us that many people experienced nineteenth-century British and Irish literatures as a group or community, rather than as individuals (Collins, 1972: 27). It is also the case of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's orature works in Kenya. Furthermore, it is also commonly accepted that written literature drew material from its predecessor 'spoken' literature (which is broader than 'oral literature') but the thought of 'spoken' literature being nourished by written literature rarely comes to mind, though it did and does happen. The objective of this paper is to show that orality feeds on literacy, that there have been various interactions between orality and literacy, various flowings into and out of each other, mainly through reading aloud. We will restrict the scope of our analysis to British, Irish and Kenyan contexts and concentrate on Dickens, Carleton, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and show that the read-aloud process constitutes an alternative form of literary acquisition that is more efficient in these contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis is carried out following the theory of orature which, as Joseph Roach defines it, 'goes beyond a schematised opposition of literacy and orality as transcendent categories' to acknowledge the interaction of these modes of communication over time (1996: 11-12). Orature advocates the lack of boundaries between art forms (drama, story, song, discourse and performance). One of its basic characteristics is the fusion and connections of all art forms and their features and elements to constitute a whole. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o explains this basic feature of orature at length, saying:

"In the narratives of orature, humans, birds, animals and plants interact freely, they often assume each others' forms, including language. Humans in distress talk to birds and give them messages, the most famous being the biblical dove sent by Noah to survey the land after the Floods. The Homeric epics The Iliad and The Odyssey assume the same interactive mutuality between the various realms of being. The most clear about this is Ovid's Metamorphosis where different forms of being change into each other - change itself, in fact, being the central theme. The classical epics in all cultures are rooted in orature: even when recorded in writing, they are realizable only in oration, narration orally." (Ngugi, 2007: 4)

The theory of orature shows that literature knows no boundary neither in literary genres nor in medium of expression. Writing is a medium through which literature is orally resurrected. Interconnectedness is very important in orature.

Another central theme of orature is performance. According to Ngugi, performance "differentiates the concept of orature from that of [written] literature. Performance involves performer and audience, in orature this often being a participatory audience. (...) But whatever the combination of location, time and audience, orature realizes its fullness in performance." (Ngugi, 2007: 7). Orature is a performative art which can take place at home at the fireside, in the village or city square, the market place, under a tree of palavers, a shrine, etc. It is through performance that the written material is realized in oration.

In addition to the theory of orature, transactional theory will be used. This theory says that the reader or performer must transact with the text to make meaning because meaning is neither in the text itself nor can it be found just with the reader, but only in the transaction between the two (Morrison, 2016). The two theories are complementary as meaning is derived from the performance of a text in a given social context and so the two are helpful in our assessment of literature and the interface between orality and print.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Reading aloud as interface between print and orality in Britain

Studies have shown that performance, in the form of reading aloud, was a common practice in medieval times and beyond, before becoming a *métier* in Victorian times (nineteenth and early twentieth century) in Europe (Rose, 1992: 47-70; Tristram, 1997). In an article on Charles Dickens (1812-1870), a critic in *The Times* (1868) evidences the practice of reading-aloud:

'Readers' are abundant; there is not a literary institution that does not in the course of a year publish a programme of entertainment in which some plays or poems to be 'read' by some person of celebrity, general or local, do not hold a prominent place, and the innocent amusement of the poor 'penny readings' in the parish schoolroom are

now commonly encouraged by every clergyman who takes a practical interest in his flock. Some readers draw everywhere; the attraction of others is confined to particular districts; but amid all the variety of 'readings' those of Mr. Charles Dickens stand alone (7 Oct. 1868: 10).

So, there existed many varieties of reading-aloud practices: sessions of reading aloud, on a yearly basis, in literary institutions by celebrities, and common, daily or weekly sessions of 'penny readings' in the parish facilities. The settings for such reading-aloud activities were various: halls, schools, the open air of districts and the fireside in homes. With the establishment of literary Institutions, Athenaeums, Mechanics' Institutes, in the 1830s and 1840s, reading-aloud and other kinds of light entertainment emerged, supplemented and later took the place of the 'lecturings' (Collins, 1972).

Reading-aloud was an art which necessitated some qualities; not everybody could venture on the *métier* of reading-aloud. Skills required for this *métier* included abilities to make intonation, emphasis, to switch from one dialect to another or from one voice to another, to tell one's hearers what to admire particularly. These skills are similar to those prescribed by Ngugi concerning storytelling (Ngugi, 2012: 79) even though there is no explicit evidence of Ngugi having been a reader-aloud like Dickens.

Lord Alfred Tennyson was an artist of reading-aloud who was most frequently referred to by many critics on this art. He was well-known for reciting or intoning choice passages from his poetry, and from time to time turning round to the audience and with a childish satisfaction say 'Isn't that grand?' (Morse, 1907: 942-944). His voice was vibrant, full of power and had a convincing quality. In his reading, there was a magnificent sense of time. The lines seemed to swing with an elastic step – like a marching regiment. Other readers-aloud or performers included English writers such as, Wordsworth, William McGonagall, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Edmund Yates, Charles Kingsley, Matthew Arnold, George MacDonald, 'Ian Maclaren', Edwin Arnold, Martin Tupper, Oscar Wilde, Anthony Hope, Hall Caine, Conan Doyle, as well as governesses or ladies' companions, fathers in families and even clergymen. (Collins, 1972).

"The books for the living voice," writes a critic in *The Nation* (1907: 560), "are essays, letters, diaries, biography, fiction and poetry" but also 'penny journals' as referred to above, religious books, especially the Bible, and surprisingly plays, in the form of virtuoso-acting. Ford reports that 'of the roughly 45,000 books published in England between 1816 and 1851, well over 10,000 were religious works, far outdistancing the next largest category – history and geography – with 4,900, and fiction with 3,500" (1969: 206). The Penny Readings movement which was established under clerical auspices were usually led by parishioners in parish halls on Saturday nights and were attended by fifteen-hundred audiences in urban areas. (Collins, 1972: 23).

The ability to speak in different voices or to switch from the voice of one dumb character to another was a quality required of readers-aloud. Great performers used language as a means for characterisation, and it is in this context that one can understand the statement of a critic in *The Nation* that "first on the list [of material used for reading aloud were] the novels of clever characterisation and vivacious dialogue" (1907: 560). The critic gives the example of Jane Austen's novels. One can also add Dickens' novels, as they lent themselves to solo performance and dramatisation and Dickens himself had conspicuous talents as an actor and reader. Housemaids who dusted the books received orders such as "Don't put my Scott, my Dickens,

my Thackeray upside down on the top shelf. I shall want it tonight' for reading aloud." (Morse, 107: 944). These authors were the choicest ones for reading aloud.

Writing about reading-aloud, Philip Collins further reports that "while *Pickwick Papers* was being serialised, for instance, a group of some twenty poor people clubbed together, not to buy the shilling parts (they could not afford that) but to hire them for twopence a day from a library, and they foregathered in a locksmith's shop where one of them read the new instalment to the others." (Collins, 1972: 6). The context is that of aural literature in which print mediated between literate orality and oral literacy.

"As for poetry," a critic of *The Nation* remarks, "reading aloud is the only way. The difference between poetry read thus and read to one's self is the difference between hearing music played and quietly studying the score. The rhythm and the rhyme, the pomp and movement of the verse, lose half their effect without the interpretation of the voice." (1907: 560). Poetry is a performance genre; as Paul Valéry puts it in his first course on poetics: "It is the performance of the poem which is the poem" (1957: 1350).

The crowds for such entertainments or sessions of reading aloud were a composite of people from all social classes, rich and poor alike, literate and illiterate, though the music halls may be different for each class. Writing of the practice of reading aloud in medieval times, Coleman said that "the audiences who preferred to have their literature read to them included monarchs, nobles, lawyers, and academics—none of whom could possibly have been constrained by illiteracy or lack of books" (Coleman, 1997: 158). For these people who could read and who could afford the books, simple sheer appreciation of hearing things read aloud became the reason for delight in reading-aloud sessions. Carlyle said that readers-aloud, such as Dickens and Thackeray, were just going about "exhibiting themselves to a lot of inquisitive people who were too lazy to read what they paid their shillings to listen to" (Quoted by Collins, 1972: 26). Similarly, Ruskin, following Dickens's death made this objection against the practice of reading aloud: "Everybody wants to hear – nobody to read – nobody to think; to be excited for an hour – and, if possible, amused." (Quoted by Collins, 1972: 26). While Tennyson's poetry was read aloud for the sovereign and his royal household, in many genteel houses, Philip Collins said, the father or mother would read novels to the assembled family. Parents would shut the door, and begin a private perusal and rehearsal for the evening's family reading: the children could hear his chuckles and guffaws, but had to wait for hours before they could share the joke." (Collins, 1972: 6-7). These various comments give us a glimpse of the frequency and weight of the practice of reading aloud or the aural reception of literature which continued throughout the nineteenth century. Even those British people who could afford to purchase books practised reading aloud, though they were literate people.

There is also evidence of the participation of poor people in reading aloud sessions in Britain. Philip Collins reports that, at twopence for adults and a penny for children, recitals were given to people in a village smithy, or in the parish schoolrooms for the innocent amusement of the poor 'penny readings.' The poor people were so delighted with such performances that they could not help stopping the artists to tell them how much they appreciated their art. One such artist, Charles Dickens, confided his experience in a letter: "One of the pleasantest things I have experienced here this time, is the manner in which I am stopped in the streets by working men, who want to shake hands with me, and tell me they know my books" (Quoted by Collins, 1972: 19). All these examples show that the literature of that time was received in a communal setting and was written with such a reception in mind, as a mid-nineteenth-century critic

wrote: "In England nowadays novels are written for families." (Quoted by Collins, 1972: 10). The fact that this family-reading habit was tended by artists who wrote for families points to a widespread practice of reading aloud.

This form of appropriation of literature, which has been described by a critic in *The Times* as "approximation to a theatre" or "theatrical, save a theatre itself", was attractive to large audiences (1870: 11) and was not restricted to Britain only, as some of the British performers, Dickens especially, performed in Ireland and America. Dickens told Forster his plan was to give less than fifty performances in London and the provinces, then in Ireland and in America (Collins, 1972: 7). There is also evidence of Dickens' performances in Ireland and of Carleton's visit to England: in 1850, Carleton went to England and though he did not meet Dickens who was away from London, he was pleased with the reputation of his own works there. (O'Donoghue, 1896: 157-159). To John McKibbin of Belfast Carleton gave his opinions on Thackeray and Dickens:

"I think that Thackeray is your great man in drawing the upper English. I spent an endeared day with him. He knows Ireland very well in an English way. He was pleased to tell me quite sincerely that in point of graphic delineation of life I was all their master. Dickens is fertile, varied, and most ingenious, but all is caricature." (O'Donoghue, 1896: 158).

Carleton had read the works of English writers and was also aware of their practices of reading aloud since it was also done in Ireland. Dickens read his works aloud in Belfast, Dublin, Cork and Limerick. In his letter to Miss Georgina Hogarth, he says that his reading at Belfast was more successful and had a better audience than in Dublin and other Irish places. In Belfast, the dear girls looked at him in the street with requests: "do me the honor to shake hands Mister Dickens and God bless you Sir; not only for the light you have been to me this night; but for the light you've been in mee house Sir (and God love your face!) this many a year." (Storey, 1995: 643). Dickens was well known as a reader-aloud in Ireland, and Carleton who calls himself the master of Thackeray and Dickens, and the Irish national writer, was to be the Irish Dickens, as writer and reader for the Irish.

Reading aloud as interface between print and orality in Ireland

By comparison to Britain where rich people showed interest in the read-aloud process, in Ireland as well as in Kenya, the majority of those interested are the poor. In nineteenth-century Ireland, the poor could not afford to buy printed materials. The scarcity of printed texts in rural areas meant that the poor peasants preciously kept the cheap chapbooks they had bought. Even the penny-journals and newspapers were very expensive, and would usually be read aloud by schoolteachers, priests or large farmers, who could afford them. In his memoir of social life in nineteenth-century Donegal, Hugh Dorian (2001: 142) reports the hardship hunters of newspaper endured while trying to get materials for nightly meetings. Newspapers were so expensive that only the wealthy people, such as priests, landlords, ministers, magistrates, squires and schoolteachers, could afford to subscribe to them. Judging from the fact that in 1830 sixty-six newspapers were published in Ireland, which sold around four million copies per year and eighty-one in 1841, with total annual sales of almost six million, Clark argues that if one assumes that a regular newspaper purchaser would buy one paper a week, then in 1841, there were around 100,000 regular purchasers in a country with a population of eight million (1979: 49). The number of subscribers was very low and as a result some publishers had to close their business. In early nineteenth century, the schoolbook publishing industry of the Kildare Place Society was one of the flourishing publishers, as

bankruptcies caused many publishers to close (Benson, 1990: 47-59). Printed materials were expensive for the poor Irish peasants.

In this context, a frequent form of transformation of written materials into oral recitations operated through performances, rumours or repetition to other people, quite independently of the printed texts. "The most obvious way in which this happened," Niall Ó Ciosáin argues, "was through the practice of reading aloud, the classic way in which written texts entered an oral culture when a society or group was partially literate." (1997: 186). Hugh Dorian in his memoir gives evidence of the oral use of printed materials, which were scarce at that time, in the nightly meetings:

The paper would be opened up before the fire and if it was a good, all seemed satisfied already; the next person sought was the reader, for we must bear in mind that none of the members of themselves wished to read any of it just then as it would prevent them from their share in the discourses. The reader was sought for and got. Pity the reader, for as regards the papers, there was no scruple whatever as to date or editor, he was generally one of the best of the scholars who was captured for to perform. The poor sufferer dared not refuse, but he had the unwelcome and arduous task of reading aloud as best he could for the whole assembly [and received] the correction, explanation and interpretation of the master who as he thought fit gave orders to stop for explanation and to proceed when comment was over. (Dorian, 2001: 142-143).

This account shows that there was a membership group of literate people and that not all members wished to read aloud, as some preferred to act as masters who could stop the reader for explanation and interpretation, which were an integral part of the practice of reading aloud.

Brian Earls, in his study of Carleton's stories, gives examples in support of this interaction between print and orality and shows that there are clues that the tales-of-the-Irish-peasantry may have percolated down to the peasantry, presumably by being read aloud by literate members of the local community (Earls, 1984: 12). For example, Carleton constructed his novel, *Willy Reilly and His Dear Coleen Bawn* (1855) around a popular ballad he found 'in a wretched state of disorder' owing to 'the inaccuracy of memory and ignorance' and decided to restore it out of honour for its rustic bard. (p. viii-xii). He was using writing as support to memory. His novel had been a support to performance, as Mr Nolan was able to tell the story without the book, though quoting the name of the book and its author. He re-ordered the plot, compressed the 880 pages of the novel into an oral tale of few pages. Thus, he recomposed the tale (Glassie, 1982: 119-126; 746-48), completing the circle from orality through writing and performance to orality.

Another example of this circulation of literature is the tale 'Tadhg Gabha agus an Dial' in *Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh I Luinse*. Brian Earls shows how the popular tale is a retelling of Carleton's 'Three wishes,' which itself derives from the oral tradition of South Ulster where Carleton heard it from his youth (1984: 10). In this interaction of print with orality, 'spoken' literature absorbed elements of print culture.

Niall Ó Ciosáin, in his study on print and popular culture in early nineteenth-century Ireland, substantiates the existence of the practice of reading-aloud in Irish rural life from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Storytelling or 'áirneáil' / 'scoraíocht' was held at night gatherings. Irish manuscripts were read and storytellers took material from printed books for

recitation at such meetings. His findings lead him to assert that “ ‘reading aloud’ is the recitation of a printed text, whether the printed object itself is present or not” (1997: 187). In this sense, a teacher or lecturer who tells his students about a book is then involved in the practice of reading aloud. To a certain extent, all teachers of literature or graduates of literature are to our world today what bards were in Ireland of the past, transmitters of a literature they have memorised to a new generation.

The existence of the practice of reading-aloud in nineteenth-century Irish society is also confirmed by Carleton’s assertion, in his autobiography, that many illiterate Irish people kept their books “most carefully laid up, under the hope that some young relation [or a passer-by] might be able to read them (the books)” (O’Donoghue, 1896: 73) for them. During his random visits to people’s houses when he was looking for job, Carleton himself found books, pamphlets, romances and novels even in houses where the people could not read English. (O’Donoghue, 1896). The fact that families were keeping the books, though they could not read, and also the fact that these books were found around the hearth (Kiely, 1948: 47) – the heart of the living room – show that these books were kept for the purpose of reading aloud anytime a literate person chanced to pass by. At Petigo, for example, Benedict Kiely reports, such a passer-by, a classical schoolmaster, read in loud a book to an audience of women and children (1948: 90-91).

Ó Ciosáin identified two kinds of reading aloud in Ireland in that historical period: a ‘vertical’ reading taking place between the prestigious literate and the poor illiterate and a ‘horizontal’ reading between equals, both dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The vertical reading places the reader above the listener: the rich read to the poor, the literate to the illiterate, and the learned to the unlearned. Newspapers, especially, were read in this way. Cox’s Magazine is an example. Niall Ó Ciosáin (1997: 188) said that it was read aloud to crowds of villagers on Sunday evenings after Mass, and on week days at the end of their day’s work as they are gather together in the front of a school to listen to a teacher read the newspapers aloud to them when he has finished his lessons.

The 1840’s portrait of Henry McManus’s Reading ‘The Nation’ after Mass is the best-known Irish illustration of reading-aloud. Hugh Dorian also reports in his memoir of these meetings, “held on the afternoons of Sundays (...), generally in the house nearest to the place of worship,” of anxious listeners waiting for a reader or performer. (Dorian, 2001: 137). This use of fixed times suggests massive audiences and important occasions that should not be missed.

On the other hand, ‘horizontal’ reading was practised in the household environment by children to their illiterate parents, or in literary circles by a literate to other literates. As more and more Irish people were getting educated, children were often literate when their parents were not, and could read to them and translate for the parents who could not speak English. Some popular printed materials, Ó Ciosáin wrote, recommended this practice: an Irish translation of *Think Well On’t* (1819) has this recommendation in its preface: “I advise fathers and mothers to make their children (if they are scholars) buy this book and frequently to read a chapter to the household.” (Ó Ciosáin, 1997: 189). These recommendations reveal the low rate of literacy at that historical period, and suggest that reading aloud was a widespread practice, as it was not limited to the illiterate but was also found among literate people.

In literate circles, in nineteenth-century Ireland, economic and material reasons or simple pleasure led some literate people who wanted to read a text to sit in a group and listen to one read aloud for the benefit of all. Niall Ó Ciosáin wrote that in many areas of Ireland from about

1820, the frequency of such horizontal reading increased, as poverty rose at the same time as literacy rates, as a result of the state funding of primary education. In his opinion, the pre-famine decades “were certainly a golden age for the cheapest collectively read (or sung) text, the single-sheet ballad.” (Ó Ciosáin, 1997: 190). He, and Hugh Dorian before him, also observed that the internal elements in these horizontal types of reading were, as already shown in the British context, made of “many interruptions, explanations, comments and criticisms,” especially when the reading text was a “historical legend, or narratives concerning local beliefs and traditions” (Ó Ciosáin, 1997: 190). We find the same thematic in Carleton’s *Traits and Stories*, and unsurprisingly, the same interruptions and comments; it is certainly not a pure coincidence. The situation is similar to cultures of orality where people interact with the teller in nightly gatherings for storytelling.

Carleton’s autobiography reveals that Carleton experienced these two kinds of reading aloud, particularly the vertical one. A rambler searching for employment, Carleton arrived at Dundalk and was received with kindness on account of his fame as a legend teller. The neighbouring families began to quarrel as to which of them should receive him. He told them ‘old classical legends, which [he] transmogrified and changed into an incredible variety of shapes.’ (O’Donoghue, 1896: 171). He was a mediator between the written classics and the audience in a culture of orality. He would have given them Irish legends, but ‘the Irish legends did not show the “larnin”’. Then, he took to inventing original narratives to the delight of his audiences: ‘I used to compose these fictions in the course of the day, while walking about, and recite them at the fireside in the evening. (...) The number of people who came to hear me in the evening was surprising.’ (O’Donoghue, 1896: 171-72). Composition of stories on paper and reading this written paper to a group of people, such as Carleton’s task as a writer and storyteller, using written literature as a support to spoken literature. Carleton was a tradition-bearer, a contributor to the printed corpus as a writer, and a performer of his writings for his audiences. The fact that some Irish people came from long distances to hear him shows how widespread were performances in community setting. Even when he moved to become an amanuensis to McDonagh, the literary tailor, he was still mediating as a performer by reading-aloud what he had written: “The poor tailor, when I read over a portion of what I had written, would fly into ecstasies, snap his fingers and dance about like a madman,” (O’Donoghue, 1896: 202) such a good performer Carleton was.

Carleton’s own works witness to his experience of this communal appropriation of print literature in an oral mode, as he gave a fairly detailed account of it in his novel, *Fardorougha the Miser or the Convicts of Lisnamona* (1839). Carleton’s description, in this novel, of a hedge school-house which was used as a meeting place for entertainments, reveals the practice of reading aloud of written texts, a ballad in this instance, and the mixture of genres (ballad reading, melody and drama) that is characteristic of works of orature for communal entertainment (Carleton, 1992: 180-181). Thus, Carleton’s own accounts show that he experienced spoken literature ‘absorbing’ elements of print culture in a collective setting, took part actively in the process, and will transcribe this experience in print form when he started writing.

Carleton also gave public readings from his writings. Correspondence between Dr. Corry of Belfast and Carleton tells of Carleton reading a story from *Traits and Stories*, ‘*Tubber Derg, or the Red Well*’ (1831, 1844), before a northern audience:

The music-hall was fairly well filled, but it was very badly lighted, and it soon became apparent that Carleton was unable to decipher correctly the book from which he read. (...) I went out and procured a number of candles; but by the time I returned, he had nearly completely broken down, and the reading had soon to be brought to abrupt conclusion. (O'Donoghue, 1896: 281).

One expected from Carleton success in this experiment on account of his having been a public entertainer through storytelling and acting on stage in his youth, but there are reasons why he failed. Back to Dublin following the event, Carleton wrote a letter to Dr Corry explaining the causes of the failure of his Belfast reading-aloud experiment: 'For three days before I read I was ill,' he wrote. 'In truth,' he continued, 'if it had been possible I would have postponed the reading on that evening, but it was too late, as some of the tickets were out. Then the story I selected was too reflective and not calculated for [this] public audience,' as it deals with Catholic piety, whereas the audience was predominantly Protestant. (O'Donoghue, 1896: 282). Another reason is that at the age of seventy, Carleton became more emotional and had a failing voice which rendered him unfit for the practice of reading aloud after the manner of Dickens. On his way back to Dublin, Carleton was also invited by a Drogheda institution to read one of his stories but he refused, as he and one of his sons were ill. (O'Donoghue, 1896: 284).

In 1864, Carleton went again to Belfast to read his new novel, *Anne Cosgrave*, to the Messrs. Read, during which performance he was 'heaving with emotion in the recital of some striking and heartfelt detail, and exhibiting to [them] how his stories were transcripts of portions of his own experience or observation.' (O'Donoghue, 1896: 302). His written stories are transcripts of oral stories, with italics, capital letters, dashes and other typographic devices being used to indicate the 'striking and heartfelt details' that were to be emphasised during recitals. These transcriptive devices in *Traits and Stories* make the stories in this collection lend themselves to performance and suggest that they were read aloud in public for large gatherings of people.

The practice of reading aloud in nineteenth-century Ireland was not restricted to poor illiterate people, as intellectual societies, such as 'The Athenaeum,' used to organise these sessions of reading aloud for large crowds. In 1866, this society invited 'the celebrated novelist,' Carleton, to read a passage from his own works in Winter Palace in Dublin. Carleton accepted the invitation and told his experience in his letter to his son James: 'The crowd was immense—the largest I ever witnessed in Dublin—consisting as it did of between six and seven thousand persons' (O'Donoghue, 1896: 318). The immensity of the attendance shows the popularity of the practice at that time. After a first speaker who recited some passages from Shakespeare, Carleton addressed the audience, thanked them for supporting the 'Athenaeum', but 'regretted that the state of [his] sight prevented [him] from giving a reading from any of [his] own works.' (O'Donoghue, 1896: 319).

The transformation of printed literature into spoken literature through performance was done in these scholarly institutions and also in barns and private houses. Reading performances were still practiced at the end of the nineteenth century, as Hugh Dorian, in his memoirs (1889-90), signalled the continuity of this literature in Ireland, particularly in Ulster. He gave the example of Stephen Swanson who 'had the advantage of being able to read' and who travelled to either the priest's house or the squire's (the then subscribers to newspapers) for news which he 'carefully stored up for the night's proceedings, his ambition being satisfied if he was able to carry to the board something new, strange or wonderful, and to be able to enlarge on what he had read.' (Dorian, 2001: 125). Swanson was thus using printed literature as aide-mémoire, learning the written material by heart in order to recite it later. These

examples show the presence throughout nineteenth century of a culture of orality that fed on printed culture in a collective setting. This practice has been brought to Africa with colonisation and has been developed and encouraged by some writers like the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

Reading aloud as interface between print and orality in Kenya

Carleton read and was inspired by Dickens. Likewise, Ngugi read Dickens (Jaggi, 2006, Ngugi, 1986: 387) and was influenced by him in many ways (Nicholls, 2016: 179). Ngugi's novels bear indeed the traces of Dickens' fiction. For example, Rachael in *Wizard of the Crow* is a reminiscent of Dickens's Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Both are sequestered wives living in a house where all clocks are stopped (Ngugi, 2007: 8) and both die in a fire wearing the dresses they had on the day of the incidence at which time the clocks stopped (Ngugi, 2007: 708). Claver Ndikuriyo has also shown the literary influences of Dickens' *Hard Times* in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri's *I will marry when I want* (Ndikuriyo, 2007).

Besides, like Dickens and Carleton, Ngugi was familiar with oral tradition, especially storytelling. He used to say that "a good storyteller is the one who raises anew the anxiety of expectation that he then goes on to satisfy. Even when listeners already know the general outline of a story and its ending, the master storyteller is still able to recreate afresh the anxiety of expectation and then satisfy it. The story becomes new in every telling and retelling." (Ngugi, 2012: 79). This idea is in line with transactional theory according to which the reader must transact with the text to make meaning, as the latter does not reside exclusively in the text. When reading or listening to a text, the reader or the listener draws on several interacting knowledge sources to make meaning (Morrison, 2016). The written text acquires new meaning at each reading aloud session. The reader-aloud like the storyteller is actively creating the literature anew.

Ngugi adapted his writing to a process of storytelling, intending them to be easily read aloud and orally recreated as in the context of storytelling. For example, by examining the pre-composition history of *Matigari*, the importance of the Gikuyu oral literary tradition in it, its setting, characterization, structure and internal organization, as well as the presence of stylistic formulas in it, Balogun comes to the conclusion that "the novel was meticulously written to conform to the characteristics of the traditional African oral epic narrative performance" (Balogun, 1995: 129). Ngugi purposely wrote *Matigari* for oral reception. It is the reason why he addresses the prefatory notes to the novel "to the reader/listener" (Ngugi, 1987: ix), inviting him/her to let "the story take place in the country of [his/her] choice", "the action take place in the time of [his/her] choice", and to "place the action in the space of [his/her] choice" and "allocate the duration of any of the actions according to [his/her] choice" (Ngugi, 1987: ix) before requesting him to:

*"Say yes, and I'll tell you a story!
Once upon a time, in a country with no name..." (Ngugi, 1987: ix).*

All these elements pertaining to oral tradition are signs that the aim is that of oral appropriation of written materials. Considering all these features of oral tradition, one can but agree with Oben that "because of its ideological orientation, *Matigari* was written for an aural audience. It is intended to be read aloud, where some people would read to groups and crowds of eager listeners." (Ngugi, 2002: 108). Many critics actually witnessed that Ngugi's book, *Matigari*, "was widely read aloud to illiterate people in Kenya." (Killam, 2004, cf. Jaggi, 2006).

Unlike Dickens and Carleton, Ngugi was not reading his works aloud to audiences but was encouraging the practice, as he wants his books to be listened to. Even *Wizard of the Crow* is addressed to listeners. The preface to this novel reads:

*"In the spirit of the dead, the living, and the unborn,
Empty your ears of all impurities, o listener,
That you may hear my story." (Ngugi, 2007: vii).*

Listening presupposes the practice of reading aloud, the conversion of the text from print into orality where it originates. In his note on the English edition of *Matigari*, Ngugi says that the "novel is based partly on an oral story" (1987: vii). Similarly to Carleton's 'Three wishes,' which is based on a popular tale and which became, through reading aloud, the tale 'Tadhg Gabha agus an Dial' (Earls, 1984: 10), Ngugi also recycled the oral story by writing it in such a way as to make it go back to the oral tradition through reading aloud. Kenyan people know Ngugi's books through reading aloud in quite the same way as Dickens and Carleton made their works known through the same process.

In addition to the influence of Dickens, one of the reasons which explains Ngugi's writing to perpetuate oral tradition is that it is the best option for the propagation of his political ideologies in an environment where higher illiteracy rate predominates (Balogun, 1995: 130). In this context of illiteracy of twentieth century Kenya that recalls that of nineteenth century Ireland and Britain, "reading aloud was seen as a pedagogical strategy that would mobilize people for practical action." (Oben, 2002: 108). Ngugi wrote his fictional works, especially *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*, in this objective.

Ngugi believes that since the Kenyan elites have become collaborators with foreign forces to exploit Kenyan people, the illiterate majority population of peasants and workers remain the only reliable groups capable of saving the country. So, he purposely composed *Matigari* for oral reception because he wants to address these hitherto neglected classes of literature consumers that are the illiterate people (Balogun, 1995: 130).

Ngugi was successful in his political strategy with *Devil on the Cross* which urged Kenyan people to overthrow the government. This novel was reprinted three times during the first year of its publication alone and it is reported that "illiterate peasants and workers bought the novel and had it read to them in their homes. Some listened to public readings in drinking bars, others heard it inside buses and taxis while in transit, and many more gathered to hear it read during lunch breaks." (Balogun, 1995: 130). *Devil on the Cross* was thus orally appropriated through the process of a "group reception of art" that "used to be the norm" in Africa (Ngugi, 1986: 82-85). It "was eventually read aloud by storytellers throughout Kenyan society." (Duiker, 2014: 304).

What favoured this oral appropriation of the novel was the orature style used by the author. The critic Akyeampong and Gates say that the narrative in *Devil on the Cross* is "told by a traditional oral narrator who combines fantasy, exaggeration, humor, and irony to satirize the excesses of the neo-liberal capitalist system in Africa. The Gikuyu edition was an instant hit and was read aloud to non-literate Kenyans in public transportation vehicles and in pubs." (2012: 463). This combination of genres is characteristic of orature.

Ngugi himself was aware and pleased that his novel went back into the oral tradition he intended it to. Years later, in his novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), he presents characters

reading *Devil on the Cross*. For example, in his second chapter, “Queuing Daemons”, one central character, Kamiti, says that he first encountered Grace Nyawira, a graduate with a degree in English, history and theatre arts from Eldares University, when she was reading the novel “*Shetani Msalabani, Satan on the Cross –or is it Devil on the Cross?*” (Ngugi, 2007: 63). Then, in chapter four, “Male Daemons”, Ngugi has a man read aloud from *Devil on the Cross* in a crowded bar, testifying to what actually happened. The narrator reports:

“There was much storytelling and ribald joking among the drinking crowd. One day in a bar he [Kamiti] found a man reading to a crowded bar from a book he called Devil on the Cross. Whenever he emptied his glass, he would stop and announce that his beak needed wetting. He would resume only after his glass had been replenished by those around him.” (Ngugi, 2007: 592).

The context is similar to the African social gathering where people tell stories while eating, drinking, and playing.

Ngugi also says that Matigari went back to oral tradition so much so that the fictional hero Matigari was believed to be a real one. In a note to the English version to the novel, Ngugi testifies:

“For a short period in 1987, Matigari, the fictional hero of the novel, was himself resurrected as a subversive political character. The novel was published in the Gikuyu-language original in Kenya in October 1986. By January 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel.” (Ngugi, 1987: viii).

The resurrection of the fictional character is symbolic of the re-appropriation of the dead written story into the alive oral tradition through reading aloud. This example shows the power of orality to sensitise and mobilise people for action.

Such writings which enable the interface between orality and print is particular. In *Homecoming* Ngugi has referred to this blend resulting from the mixture of the oral and written traditions as orature (1972: 76). It is no wonder then that he dedicated *Matigari* “to all those who research and write on African orature” (Ngugi, 1987: vi). Assessments of pieces of orature therefore demand specific criteria and training. That’s why, as many African works partake of orature, artfully blending elements of the written and oral traditions, Gillam (2004) deems it important to offer students and teachers a meaningful context in which to explore the African Authors’ works which have been incorporated into the Language Arts and Cultural Studies curriculum.

A piece of orature actually demands a reader-aloud and a listener. The latter draws on his/her prior knowledge and on the questions generated by the text and answered to make meaning out of the text while the former incorporates variations in tone and volume of the voice, questions, eye contact, and comments to bring listeners into enjoying his/her delivery (Morrison, 2016). So, readers and listeners alike should be taught how to apply these strategies

to read, listen to and understand the text. Motivation is of paramount importance. The context of the reading situation, the text being chosen can motivate listeners. Researchers have found out that students learn more through these kinds of peer collaborative learning approaches by comparison to learning in isolation or in the context of a teacher's instruction (Morrison, 2016). Reading-aloud has benefits to literacy learning as it contributes to pupils' vocabulary development and comprehension growth and instilling the desire for reading.

The benefits of the read-aloud process have led Michael Kevane to develop it in Burkina with positive feedback from pupils, teachers and school directors. The process involved a "variety of reading activities, from quiet reading, to reading partners, to reading aloud in larger groups, (...) fun activities such as mask-making, drawing, singing and calisthenics" (Kevane, 2015: 7), everything which recreates traditional storytelling environment. Compared to solo silent reading, Kevane found out through an impact evaluation of the effects of his summer reading camps, carried out through written and oral reading assessments administered before and after the programs, that "participants in the summer camps had scores on reading assessment tests that were about 5 points higher (about 8% higher, or about half the standard deviation) than those of the students in the other groups." (Kevane, 2015: 7). This way of appropriating literature through reading aloud should be more developed in countries like Burkina Faso and Kenya where orature holds an importance place. It is in this way that African writers' works will be appreciated. *Matigari* and *Devil on the Cross* are illustrations of this. In them, written tradition is put at the service of the oral one. There is no tool in western novelistic to analyse such works. It is necessary to turn to the scholarship in oral tradition which has room for the interaction between orality and literacy.

CONCLUSION

Our objective was to show that despite all expectations, many people in Britain, Ireland and Kenya experienced nineteenth and twentieth-century literatures as a group or community, rather than as individuals and also to highlight the fact that orality feeds on literacy, that there have been various flowings into and out of orality and literacy. Being readers-aloud or interested in orature, Dickens, Carleton and Ngugi produced printed material that were to be used as aids to oral literature through reading aloud. It is in this way that many nineteenth-century British people get to know Dickens' works (Colins, 1972: 19). Through the same process, at least two of Carleton' *Willy Reilly and His Dear Coleen Bawn* (1855) and "Three Wishes" went from written form into orality. Equally, at least two of Ngugi's works, *Matigari* and *Devil on the Cross* were orally appropriated. Thus, literature in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland and twentieth-century Kenya was a group or communal experience, rather than an individual one. The place audiences at those historical times gave to performance or sessions of reading-aloud was so important that it had an impact on writers, such as Dickens, Carleton and Ngugi in their production of performative arts or works of orature. That these writers were influenced by performance in the form of reading aloud means that their works cannot be fully assessed without paying attention to the element of performance (key element of orature) which influenced their styles of writing and which makes easier their transformation into orality.

The comparison of the three authors shows that Dickens influenced Carleton and the two are distant precursors of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, thus testifying that orature is not specific to Africa. The reality existed prior to the coining of the term. As Ngugi puts it, "Orature does not simply refer to Africa; we can talk about Asian, African, European, Pacific and Latin American orature. And within each we can talk about classical and contemporary orature." (Ngugi, 2012: 83)

This study also leads us to two further realizations: first, that the read-aloud process proves more effective for the acquisition of literary works and reading skills; second, that writing is but “a ‘secondary modelling system’, dependent on a prior primary system, spoken language. Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality.” (Ong, 2012: 8). And with the advent of the digital which is progressively replacing the print, orality still holds an important place as it is but a medium of literary expression which has its basis in orality. In-depth exploration needs be done in this electronic and cyber space to develop this read-aloud process as an alternative form of literary training to the benefit of specific categories of students.

Works Cited List

- ‘Letter to Miss Georgina Hogarth, 29 August 1858.’ In Storey, G. and Tollotson, K. (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 8: 1856-1858, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 643.
- ‘St. George’s Hall’ in *The Times*, 7 February 1870, p. 11.
- ‘The Pleasant Practice of Reading Aloud’ in *The Nation*, vol. 85, no. 2216, Dec. 19, 1907, p. 560.
- Akyeampong, E. K. and Gates, H.L. (2012), *Dictionary of African Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2720 p.
- Balogun, F. O. (1995), ‘Matigari: An African Novel as Oral Narrative Performance,’ in *Oral Tradition*, 10/1: 129-65.
- Benson, C. (1990), ‘Printers and Booksellers in Dublin 1800-1850.’ In Myers R. and Harris, M. (eds.), *Spreading the Word: The Distribution Networks of Print, 1550-1850*, Winchester: St Paul’s Bibliographies, pp. 47-59.
- Carleton, W. (1855), *Willy Reilly and His Dear Coleen Bawn: A Tale Founded upon Fact*, London, Hope & Co, 507 p.
- Carleton, W. (1992), *Fardorougha the Miser or the Convicts of Lisnamona*, Belfast, Apple Tree, 492 p.
- Clark, S. (1979), *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 434 p.
- Coleman, J. (1997), ‘On Beyond Ong: Taking the Paradox out of “Oral Literacy” (and “Literate Orality”).’ In Tristram, H. L. C. (ed.), *Medieval Insular Literature between the Oral and the Written II: Continuity of Transmission*, Tübingen, Gunter Nar Verlag, pp. 155-176.
- Collins, P. (1972), *Reading Aloud: A Victorian Metier*, Lincoln, Keyworth and Fry Ltd., 36 p.
- Dorian, H. (2001), *The outer Edge of Ulster: A Memoir of Social Life in Nineteenth-century Donegal*. In Mac Suibhne B. and Dickson, D. (eds), *Notre Dame*, University of Notre Dame Press, 352 p.
- Duiker, W. (2015), *Contemporary World History*, (6th ed), Canada, Cengage Learning, 384 p.
- Earls, B. (1984), “A Note on Seanachas Amhlaoibh I Luinse”, in *Béaloides* 52: 12.
- Ford, B. (1969), *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 6, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 516 p.
- Glassie, H. (1982), *Passing the Time: Folklore and History of an Ulster Community*, Dublin, The O’Brien Press, 832 p.
- Jaggi, M. “Review: Wizard of the Crow”
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/09/featuresreviews.guardianreview21> Accessed on 23/08/2016.
- Jaggi, M. “The Outsider.” https://www.nyu.edu/gallatin/gwt/texts/WeepNotChild/On.../Ngugi_the_Outsider.doc. Accessed on 23/08/2016.
- Kevane, M. (2015), *Community Libraries and Reading Programs for Youth in Burkina Faso*.
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>. Accessed on 23/08/2016.
- Kiely, B. (1948), *Poor Scholar: A Study of the Works and Days of William Carleton (1794-1869)*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 198 p.
- Killam, G. D. (2004), *Literature of Africa*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 224 p.
- Morrison, V. and Wheeler, L. <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/revisiting-read-aloud-instructional-strategies-encourage-students-engagement-text> Accessed 08/08/2016.

Morse, J.H. (1907), "Reading Aloud," in *Independent*, 62, 942-944.

Ndikuriyo, C. (2007), *Economic machination in victorian england and postcolonial africa : a study of Charles Dickens' Hard times and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri's I will marry when I want*, Bujumbura, University of Burundi, Institute for Applied Pedagogy, English-Kirundi Department.

Ngugi, W. T. (1980), *Devil on the Cross*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 256 p.

Ngugi, W. T. (1986), *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London, James Currey, 114 p.

Ngugi, W. T. (1987), *Matigari*, Trans. by Wangui wa Goro, Nairobi, Heinemann, 122 p.

Ngũgĩ, W. T. (2007), "Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature," in *Performance Research*, Vol. 12, 3: 4-7. DOI: 10.1080/13528160701771253.

Ngugi, W. T. (2007), *Wizard of the Crow*, London, Vintage, 768 p.

Ngugi, W. T. (2012), *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 120 p.

Nicholls, B. (2016), *Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading*, London, Routledge, 222 p.

Ó Ciosáin, N. (1997), *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland, 1750-1850*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd, 266 p.

O'Donoghue, D. J. (1896), *The Life of William Carleton, An Account of His Life and Writings, From the Point at which the Autobiography Breaks Off*, 2 vols., vol. 2., London, Downey and Co., 232 p.

Obeng, S. G. and Hartford, B. (2002), *Political Independence with Linguistic Servitude: The Politics about Languages in the Developing World*, New York, Nova Science Publishers, 386 p.

Ong, W. J. (2012), *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th Anniversary Edition, London and New York, Routledge, 264 p.

Roach, J. (1996), *Cities of the Dead: Circum Atlantic Performance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 320 p.

Rose, J. (1992). "Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 51, 1: 47-70.

Valéry: (1957), *Œuvres I*. Paris, Gallimard, 1695 p.