GOING BACK TO ONE'S ROOTS: THE REVIVAL OF ORAL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES IN THE ENGLISH CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

ANA CRISTINA BĂNICERU

West University of Timişoara

Abstract: *My paper examines the interplay between the sophisticated postmodernist techniques of intertextuality, parody, metafiction and a return to orality or better said of pseudo-orality, a simulated-oral discourse or what the Russian Formalists called "skaz", brought about by much postcolonial, ethnic or feminist literature.*

Keywords: *grotesque discourse, intertextuality, metafiction, oral discourse, pseudo-orality, skaz narratives, storytelling*

1. From the novel of introversion to secondary orality and *skaz* narratives

If the word *extroversion* best characterises orality due to its participatory nature, *introversion* becomes the attribute of literacy. The interactive relationship of the oral narrative is replaced by the double absence of writer and reader who produce and read the text in solitude. This introversion is transferred to the text through an increased concern with language and a gradual internalisation of narrative technique. From a technical point of view, the self-conscious, almost plotless and de-heroicized, modernist novel is apparently completely different from the oral discourse. The "uncanny" access to the characters' minds, allowed by what

Stanzel (1999:161) called the "reflector" mode focusing on a character that thinks, feels and perceives but never addresses the reader like a narrator, and the detached "unnatural" perspective of the camera-eye are poles apart from the garrulous storyteller of oral cultures.

Moreover, Walter Benjamin in his much celebrated and quoted essay "The Storyteller" (1936) pessimistically announced the demise of traditional storytelling due to the depressive inter-World War spirit that suffused much of the modernist literature then. Unfortunately, Benjamin did not live enough to see the revival of orality, or better said of pseudo-orality, a simulated-oral discourse or what the Russian formalists called *skaz*, used extensively by postmodernist writers. Hence, new literary forms have appeared: Magic Realism, ethnic and postcolonial literature. "Simulation of orality in writing appears to want to restore this situation of live communication in a medium that is necessary marked by detachment, solitude, privacy, and lack of context" (Brooks 1987:36). The keyword here is simulation, since what we have is a simulation of oral discourse, a fabrication, a simulacrum.

This new orality called by Ong (2002:133) secondary orality resembles primary orality, the orality before the invention of writing, in its participatory mystique, its focus on community and concentration on the present moment, and even in its use of formulae. However, as I have said above, this is a simulated orality, thus a more self-conscious and deliberate one which cannot function without writing and print.

> Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary

orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture—McLuhan's "global village". Moreover, before writing, oral folk were group-minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of secondary orality, we are group minded, self-consciously and programmatically. The individual feels that he or she, as an individual, must be socially sensitive. Unlike members of a primary oral culture, who are turned outward because they have had little occasion to turn inward, we are turned outward because we have turned inward. In a like vein, where primary orality promotes spontaneity because the analytic reflectiveness implemented by writing is unavailable, secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous. (Ong 2002:134)

This is the orality of the Media, its excessive rhetoric overwhelms us. We are bombarded with personal stories, confessions, whether we like it or not. Everybody wants to tell their story, everybody demands an audience. We have talk shows, reality shows, political debates, personal blogs, stand-up comedies. We have a simulated return to the archetypal storytelling scene in which a storyteller sits in front of his/her audience, which in its turn takes an active part in the performance. The keyword becomes extroversion; an extroversion pushed to its extremes which was also transposed in the novel. Therefore, this archetypal storyteller scene is re-enacted over and over again in *skaz* literature.

According to Kenneth Womack (2006: 115), *skaz* remains one of the most important contributions to literary criticism given by Russian formalists.

A richly textured narrative technique inherent in nineteenth and twentieth century Russian prose, skaz refers to literary works in which metaphor, theme and point of

view function according to the stylistic requirements of oral and folk tales. (2006:115)

The word comes from the Russian *skazat* which means "to tell" and it is semantically related to *rasskaz*, "short story" and *skazka*, "fairy tale". Jacob L. Mey (2000:166) links *skaz* to homodiegetic novels where an *I* person is telling his/her story to someone else; thus this dialogic *I* is characterised by "addressivity". According to the same author, this narrative device is closely connected to oral discourse and the vernacular. Mey (2000:167) also links *skaz* to dialect, or more precisely to "eye" dialect or phonetic deviation: "[overall] the storytelling genre of skaz is coloured by the intrusion of the vernacular into the language of the characters (including the language of the narrator as a character)".

Bakhtin distinguishes two types of *skaz*: simple and "parodic" *skaz*. The former is made of what Bakhtin called words of the second type (objectified discourse of a represented person); this is the case of Leskov's oral narration who according to Bakhtin uses *skaz* not for its orality but primarily to represent "a socially foreign discourse and a socially foreign worldview" (Morson & Emerson 1990:153). The latter, exemplified in Gogol's "The Overcoat" is the doubled-voiced *skaz* or the dialogised *skaz* (with "quotation marks" which does more than use oral discourse, it also shows an orientation towards another's distinctive discourse). According to Bakhtin, quoted in Morson and Emerson:

> [to] ignore in *skaz* its orientation toward someone else's discourse and, consequently, its double-voicedness, is to be denied any understanding of those complex interrelationships into which voices, once they have become varidirectional, may enter within the limits of *skaz* discourse (1990:154).

For Fludernik (1993:107) skaz is "a form of storytelling that imitates, parodies and stylizes oral storytelling" which can be encountered in both first and third person narratives. In the latter case, it takes the form of *vox communis* or *communis opinio* which can develop into the voice of *the villagers* thus establishing an empathetic connection with the readers (Fludernik 1996:220-221). Recent novels employ frequently this type of narration characterised by excessive addressivity and the use of the vernacular or dialect. It is enough to mention Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing,* Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion,* Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides.* More recent example of *skaz* are highly dialogical, to use Bakhtin's term showing a distinct orientation towards the discourse of another. This leads us to the next topic that of intertextuality.

2. Postmodernism and the Revival of Orality

Before writing, the notion of authorship did not exist. There were no authors, but only storytellers or narrators and since there were no authors, one cannot talk about originality, not in our sense of the term. The performance could have been original, but not the story as such. In fact, what they did was to recycle and rearrange plots or themes that had proved successful in the past, in other words, they juggled with them; embellished them according to the needs and desires of their audience, which, of course, took a very active part in the making of the narrative. Repetition with variation was also necessary in the absence of any recoding devices: without reiteration, a story would have been lost. This is one aspect of intertextuality: recycling old stories, weaving together different narrative

threads. I could not think of a better metaphor to illustrate this than Rushdie's Sea of Stories from *Haroun*.

> Traditionally, stories were stolen, as Chaucer stole his; or they were felt to be the common property of a culture or community…. These notable happenings, imagined or real, lay outside language the way history itself is supposed to, in a condition of pure occurrence. (Gass qtd. in Hutcheon 1988:124)

However, what oral stories lack is the deliberate ironic or parodic dimension which is a defining characteristic of intertextuality. Without the existence of an author we cannot speak about distance between author and narrator or author and story, and without distance we cannot talk about irony (irony implies distance and authorship). Of course, we do have the distance between storyteller and characters, listeners and characters, hence the humour arising from their description since both storyteller and listeners share a common ground. But this is something else. Moreover, without any means of recording such as writing or print, it was practically impossible to re-visit a story and rewrite it in a parodic key. Nevertheless, the possible connections between orally delivered stories and intertextuality need careful reconsideration.

The issue of intertextuality leads to the next topic that of metafiction or what Hutcheon calls narcissistic narrative (1999:203). Orally delivered stories presuppose the existence of a storyteller that performs a story in front of an audience. The invention of writing resulted in the disappearance of both storyteller and listener and the emergence of the author and the reader. But the author does not write his/her text in the presence of the reader, therefore, the interactive relationship of the oral narrative is replaced by the double absence of writer and reader (and by the double fictionality of

narrator and narratee). In the oral tradition the narrative was being created in front of the audience with the assistance of the same audience. With writing, the narrative process becomes invisible; this is the case of much Realistic literature, which in its eagerness to imitate reality, hides the scaffolding of the text. When the novelist exposes the hidden mechanism of the text and invites his readers behind the scenes, the narrative process becomes visible, thus the focus shifts from "fiction" to "narration", from the plot proper, to the plot of narrating. The former type of plot is action oriented, whereas the latter is linguistically oriented. However, when the author decides to re-create the archetypal storytelling scene with a garrulous narrator and an active narratee, as is the case with much ethnic, postcolonial literature, and historiographic metafictions, both the plot proper and the plot of narrating become central. Thus, *skaz* or simulated orality becomes the perfect pretext to combine the sophisticated Postmodernist metafictional game with a non-nostalgic return to plot and story-line.

Not to mention that the narcissistic narrative, with its metafictional structure, bares its fictional and linguistic systems to the reader's view, transforming the process of making, of *poiesis*, into part of the shared pleasure of reading (Hutcheon 1999:203). The reader, according to reader-response theory, holds the key to meaning in a text:

> As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, so the reader – from those same words – manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is much his creation as is the novelist's. (Hutcheon 1999:208)

This freedom of the reader in interpreting a literary text, correlated with new techniques used by writers, such as parody, intertextuality or metafiction, which replace the author-text relationship with one between

reader and text, can be said to parallel to some extent the interactive component of oral literature that demands active involvement on the part of the listener both in transmitting the story but also in its delivering. Not to mention that the rise of popular fiction has resurrected the plot and story line, no matter how truncated these two might be in a postmodernist novel.

In her essay about Magical Realism and Postmodernism, Wendy B. Faris (1995:164) writes about the "replenished" postmodern narrators, somehow in opposition to the "exhausted" modernist narrators and calls them Scheherazade's children "born of the often death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction but somehow able to pass beyond it". They rejuvenate the hermetic discourse of their forerunners and their desire for accessibility, and I would add, their return to plot is in contrast with the highly introverted modernist narrative. According to Faris (1995:163), Scheherazade embodies the high modernist narrator – "exhausted and threatened by death, but still inventing".

Scheherazade's children are storytellers deeply rooted in orality, but since they belong to the 20th century, their orality is a mixture between primary and secondary orality. According to Hoogestraat (1998:51), Ong's distinction between primary and secondary orality is deemed to be very useful since it allows those who were excluded from the dominant, central colonial languages to recreate their past histories using an alternative discourse. She goes on to say that Ong's work acknowledges the category of primary orality as a way of imagining the language and culture of others whose language was assimilated or has not survived because of the colonial oppression. However, recreating primary orality can be seen as a utopian endeavour, since according to Tyler (qtd. in Hoogestraat 1998:51) a purely

oral culture survives only as an absence in the written record of an ethnographer. To him, the Ongian "primary orality" and Derridean "absence" are almost identical: "[the] oral voice of natives becomes the absent centre around which the text revolves and without which it would not exist" (Hoogestraat 1998:53). The keyword here is absence and thus it becomes important to re-imagine and re-create the absent voices that haunt the official "cultures" and languages. In this category we can include not only the missing voices of the colonised, but also the absent voices of women or of homosexuals, transsexuals, and the list could continue to include the madman, the convict, the social outcast. Therefore, images of the carnival or of the circus proliferate in the contemporary literature as a way of asserting difference and diversity.

How can one give them voice? By allocating them the role of the storyteller and by allowing them the freedom of an oral discourse within the very limits of a written one. Hence, we encounter a proliferation of first person narratives, displaying a wide range of idiosyncratic narrators; a polyphony of voices looking for an audience, a polyphony of voices that infuse and even saturate contemporary literature. Paradoxically, in many cases the recreation of an oral discourse requires a first person narrative. I use the word "paradoxical" since stories of personal experience were quite rare in ancient and medieval oral stories. Storytellers were not seen as individuals but as members of a community that represented the values of that community, taking their authority from tradition. People started to be perceived as individuals later on but only in relationship with divinity, with God (see St. Augustine's *Confessions*). Only when religion was replaced by morality, could we talk about the rise of individual (Fludernik 1996:77). Also, in an oral storytelling situation the listener is in the presence of the

174

storyteller, whereas in a writing situation the storyteller is absent, and the best to make him/her present is to give him/her the voice of a first person narrator.

The absent voice that becomes present takes on a subversive role, crosses the boundaries of discourse, becomes an "ontological" *I*. I am adopting here McHale's distinction between the epistemological dominant (Modernism) and the ontological one (Postmodernism). The epistemological *I* or storyteller (this is the case of Marlow from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) is concerned with knowledge and the limits of knowledge, how much you can know yourself and the others. Whereas, much Postmodernist writing, according to McHale (1987:10) deals with violating boundaries. *Skaz* narrators violate first of all world and stylistic boundaries. What do I mean by world boundaries? In many cases, the oral discourse is coupled with a fantastic mode that seeps peevishly in the realistic discourse to undermine the latter, hence, the adherence of many narratives to a mythical consciousness specific to the oral mode. I am now referring to historiographic metafiction, which combines the mythical consciousness of the timeless storyteller and the historical consciousness of the writer of history (the novels of Winterson, Rushdie, Ackroyd, Barnes, etc.). This duality translates itself into a quasi-mythicality that skilfully subverts all dominant accounts of the official past. Therefore, they re-tell the past through the filters of memory which becomes almost entangled with collective memory: a repository of myths, dreams. The inability of oral cultures to document the past in a systematic and detailed manner, due to the absence of writing, of course, means that they are dominated not by a historical but a mythic consciousness. The adoption of a mythic consciousness frees *skaz* narrators from the constraints of time and realism.

Moreover, according to Bal (1999:147)

> memory is also the joint between time and space. Especially in stories set in the former colonies, the memory evokes a past in which people were dislodged from their space by colonizers…Going back in retroversion to the time in which the place was a different kind of space is a way of countering the effects of colonization.

The space becomes entangled with myth and fantasy; a reinvented space for a different, ex-centric identity and this return to a mythical space is also reflected in the adoption of a different discourse of what I call a grotesque discourse. I will explain the term later in my paper.

Sometimes the fantastic mode finds expression in fairytales, especially in the novels or short stories of Angela Carter ("The Lady of the House of Love"), Emma Tennant (*Wild Nights*), Jeanette Winterson (*Sexing the Cherry*) or Margaret Atwood (*The Robber Bride*). Nevertheless, it is a parodic rewriting of fairytales in a feminist key; in fact many female writers have adopted this feminine fantastic that has its origins at the margins of patriarchy and heterosexuality. To the same category, one can also add science fiction with narrators representing an alternative reality and addressing narratees which can be members of the same community. *Skaz* narrators are usually described as narrators or storytellers who are associated with the setting of a story, usually their hometown or country (Fludernik 1996:274). One can add here alternative reality, be it science fiction or fantasy: Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* Sometimes they even adopt the language of that community and the narrator addresses a narratee who is allegedly a member of that community (Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*).

3. Postmodernism and the Oral Discourse

The intrusion of the fantastic mode into the realistic one is paralleled by the intrusion of the oral discourse into the written one. Many postmodernist novelists use what I have termed a grotesque discourse. Bakhtin defined the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World* (1987), correlating it with carnival festivities. Hence, the grotesque did not have a negative meaning, contrary to commonly held belief which equals it with monstrosity and deformity, gross naturalism, a negative connotation recently acquired, but had a positive, assertive character, it meant regeneration and renewal. The grotesque discourse is the combination between the oral discourse and the written one, or in other words the written discourse is renewed by the oral one.

In what follows I am going to briefly present some characteristics of oral discourse, as it is used by postmodernist writers. I do not wish to exhaust all the possibilities; instead I will focus on a few illustrative examples. Obviously, not all the narratives that use a garrulous, visible narrator are intensely oral (maybe with the exception of ethnic and postcolonial novels).

Oral discourse is *situational rather than abstract*. This situational use of words becomes obvious in the treatment of metaphors. Metaphors have both literal and idiomatic import. We normally use the idiomatic import in everyday situations, whereas writers like Rushdie or Morrison use both the idiomatic and the literal. The combination of the two is meant to recreate that situational, non-abstract language infused with a mythical reality. Thus, all mundane reality acquires mythical significance: "metonymy and metaphor, as essential phenomenological and

epistemological structures, are more deeply integral to the oral consciousness than they are to the chirographic mind (Janmohamed 2002:46)". In *Midnight's Children* metaphors for the making of a story from the fragmented view obtained by a doctor of his patient through a hole in a sheet, to the chutnification of history in jars that corresponds to the chapters of the novel appear quite often. Oral cultures explain abstract notions such as love, friendship using animals, fables. This is what Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*, following the pattern of African stories. Narrative becomes the best tool for creating situational language. "Since oral cultures cannot generate abstract or scientific categories for coding experience, they use stories of human (or anthropomorphized animal) action to organize, store, and communicate knowledge and experience" (Janmohamed 2002:46). Thus, for example, oral narrative will often incorporate folktales, orations, fables.

In the absence of writing, memory played an essential part in the preservation and transmission of information. However, verbatim memory without writing is almost impossible. Hence, a question arises: how could an oral society commit to memory and then transmit its wealth of information? One possible solution is offered by the use of visual clues or visual mnemonics,

> which are material objects and sometimes graphic signs that fall short of fully fledged writing because they do not record linguistic expressions per se but only loosely refer to them. (Goody 2000:29)

Also, the information stored with the help of mnemonic systems is hardly verbatim: "instead such systems present you with an object or a grapheme to remind you of an event or a recitation, which you then

178

elaborate", thus they offered a multiplicity of meanings through their multireferential iconography: coloured beads, for example, referred to specific culture heroes, lines of beads to migrations (Goody 2000:30).

In the hands of postmodernist writers like Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson or A.L. Kennedy these mnemonics or communicators become alternative storytelling devices and have a well-established narrative function. Salman Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* uses one of his characters' paintings to construct the narrative, A.L. Kennedy's narrator uses alcoholic beverages to weave her story in *Paradise,* Jeanette Winterson's ungendered narrator structures the story around his/her lover's body.

Oral discourse is *participatory, performative, empathetic and antagonistically toned* (Ong 2002:43-46). In other words, both storyteller and listener have an active role in the creation of the story: the storyteller delivers the story and the listener enhances the performance by responses, questions, asides, comments. Therefore, many Postmodernist writers used not only dramatized narrators but also dramatized narratees: Saleem and Padma in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Dr. Jordan and Grace Marks in Atwood's *Alias Grace.* Sometimes they are not characters in the story but they are mentioned explicitly by the narrator: extradiegetic narratees (Alex's narratee in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*). To simulate an interactive, oral discourse, narrators will use: embedded false starts and hesitations (Saleem in *Midnight's Childen*, formulaic openings or phrases (*The Passion* by Winterson), language that belongs to a certain community (*A Clockwork Orange* by Burgess), periphrasis and apostasy (*Things Fall Apart* by Achebe), verbal habits, addressee and speaker-oriented markers (*The Satanic Verses* by Rushdie).

4. Conclusion

This return to orality, or better said to pseudo-orality "can be regarded as the ultimate endpoint in a conceptual development from oral storytelling into written forms of narrative and their eventual re-oralization at the other end of the spectrum" (Fludernik 1996:178-179). Such a return accommodates influences from both current postmodernist writing practices such as *skaz* narrations, intertextuality, metafiction, experimenting with language, time, space and history, and from alleged oral traditions. Thus, it is only natural for ethnic, postcolonial, feminist literature and not only to have adopted this technique of pseudo-orality which gives voice and freedom of expression to the before silenced ex-centric voices. The use of such a technique, especially for ethnic and postcolonial writers, could suggest a nostalgic return to one's roots.

References:

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1987 (1968). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Bal, M. 1997. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Benjamin, W. 1973 (1936). "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations*. Fontana, pp. 90-101.

Brooks, Peter. 1987. "The Storyteller", *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1.1, 21-38.

Faris, W. 1995. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" in Parkinson, L., Z. Faris, W (eds). *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durharn & London: Duke University Press, pp. 162-174.

Fludernik, M. 1996. *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*. London: Routledge.

Fludernik, M. 1993. *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*. London: Routledge.

Goody, J. 2000. *The Power of the Written Tradition.* Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Hoogestraat, Jane. 1998. "Discoveries of Something New: Ong, Derrida, and Postcolonial Theory". Weeks, D., L. Hoogestraat, J. (eds). *Time, Memory, and the Verbal Arts – Essays on the Thought of Walter Ong*. Massachusetts: Associated University Presses, pp. 51-61.

Hutcheon, L. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* New York: Routledge.

Hutcheon, L. 1999. "Modes and Forms of Narrative Narcissism: Introduction of a typology" in Onega, S. and Garcia Landa, J.A. (eds). *Narratology: An Introduction.* London and New York: Longman, pp. 203-214.

Janmohamed, Abdul. 1998. "Sophisticated Primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's Things Fall Apart" in Iyasere, Solomon O. (ed). *Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism.* New York: Whitston Publishing, pp. 86-105.

Mey, J. L. 2000. *When Voices Clash: A Study in Literary Pragmatics.* Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

McHale, Brian. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Morson, G.S. Emerson, C. 1990. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ong, W.J. 2002. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* London and New York: Routledge

Stanzel, F. K. 1996. "A New Approach to the Definitions of the Narrative Situations" in Onega, S. and Garcia Landa, J.A. (eds). *Narratology: An Introduction.* London and New York: Longman, pp. 161-171.

Womack, Kenneth. 2006. "Russian Formalists, the Moscow Linguistic Circle, and Prague Structuralism: Boris Eichenbaum, Jan Mukarovsky, Victor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov, Roman Jakobson" in Wolfreys, Julian (ed). *Modern European Criticism and Theory. A Critical Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 112-117.