

Editorial

The present issue of *JEMS* (*Out Loud: Practices of Reading and Reciting in Early Modern Times*) intends to map an insidious territory. The debate about orality is not only old, but illustrious, since it has been revolving, for a couple of centuries, around two fundamental texts of the Western canon, i.e. the Homeric poems, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. And yet, this subject, while inevitably involving the field of ‘orality’, concentrates on a more specific instance of that domain, and, in line with the chronological span of this journal, on a specific time span known as ‘early modern’. This means that the ‘orality’ dealt with in this volume cannot be separated from the phenomenon which characterizes the beginning of the early modern era, i.e. the invention of printing – certainly, a non-Homeric phenomenon. That is why this is an insidious territory. The ‘literature read aloud’ dealt with in the present volume is assailed from every corner by concurrent and competing traditions and procedures of the fruition of literary texts: silent reading of books, which the printing industry made readily available; the subsequent, general increase of literacy, especially in Protestant countries; the explosion (or re-explosion) of the theatre as a secular, open form of entertainment. And yet, all these phenomena, which might seem to discourage and make sadly obsolete the custom of reading aloud, in the end reveal themselves to be peculiar, but effective bed-fellows of this very custom. The main, collective and final result of the essays in the present volume is precisely the demonstration of the interferences, reciprocal influences, and productive reactions that took place between the persistent, resilient habit of ‘reading aloud’ and the other means of getting acquainted with a verbal text.

The Introduction by Cesare Molinari, in this sense, frames this issue by addressing head-on the challenging nature of the subject. An experienced scholar in the field of theatre studies, Molinari is quite aware especially of the porous borders between the actual performance of a text – on a designated stage, in a theatre of some sort, by professional actors, with the aid of all the customary paraphernalia of a show – and the very different nature of simple ‘reciting’, or reading aloud, a text. This is why his contribution does not avoid the confrontation between these two procedures of oral fruition of a text, where the addressee, in both cases, is a listener and not a reader. Molinari emphasises first of all the discredit that written texts – and its custodians – seem to nourish against any form of taking over by the human voice, be it the voice of a simple reader, or of a professional actor. This is why Lycurgus (fourth century BCE)

had a measure approved providing for the setting up of bronze statues of the three great fifth-century tragedians – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – in the Theatre of Dionysus (which had recently been rebuilt in stone). At the same time he also



ordered that the authentic texts of their works be placed in the city archives so as to prevent actors from introducing additions or variations. (25)

This is why the Shakespearean first folio and subsequent editions were so anxious to protect the true words of the Bard from the ‘iniurious impostors’ who ‘maimed’ and ‘deformed’ them. But even such an exclusionary relationship between written, and oral texts, even in the perilous domain of theatrical works, can give way to a sort of alliance. Molinari cites the well known case of the reading aloud (not performance!) of Alfieri’s tragedies in Florence, in private, by the author himself: the reduction of a potential public performance to a one-man reading aloud, something intended as a preliminary test for sure, but also perfectly autonomous per se, and charged with demanding expectations by the author/reciter. On the other hand, Molinari demonstrates how fragile and ever changing this relationship of rivalry/alliance between theatrical texts performed/read aloud can be. A situation similar to the one staged by Alfieri in his Florentine home – the recitation of *Marion Delorme* by Victor Hugo, at ‘a meeting of the cream of Parisian intelligentsia’ – turned into an instantaneous, unintentional rehearsal of the play, when one of the listeners, Baron Taylor, at that time the manager of the Théâtre Français, ‘forced Hugo to sell him the play forthwith’ (27). In Molinari’s view, a text read aloud is, in other words, always on the threshold of the stage: but what is interesting is exactly the distance, small as it may be, that separates the two: it is the border, as thin as can be, which is of the utmost interest here. Another border explored by Molinari is the one between the book and recitation. Where the book – and here Molinari delights in pushing the challenge to the extreme – is not simply an ordinary literary text but, again, a ‘book’ for the theatre, a script. In this case, Molinari deals with the relationship between memory and the reciting voice, considering the case of a written text which lies behind the voice, but has been hidden and ‘forgotten’ when the voice speaks aloud. And, again, the most interesting cases are those when the border is more fragile. Molinari addresses here the questions of the improvisation in the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*, reaffirming the opinion that this phenomenon actually existed (against some illustrious negationists), but emphasizes the importance of the written texts consulted and memorized by the improvising actors in order to accumulate the verbal means which allowed them the acrobatic quality of their technique: here we have, once again, a case of an alliance between the book and the voice. Certain specific occurrences of an alliance of this type seem even more enticing: the case when ‘the story-teller recites, book in hand (the *Kings of France*), which did not stop him gesticulating and moving about on the small platform: he looked at the book when he needed to, as though it were a prompt’ (28); the case of ‘May celebrations along the North Tuscan coast’, where, according to some scholars, ‘the presence of a prompt or scroll’ is included, but ‘the audience could not see them’; whereas, in the personal experience of Molinari himself, such a presence sometimes is visible: he recalls

a *Maggio* (traditional May celebration-performance) held near a village in the Apennine mountains. It was thus a specifically theatrical occasion. There was a single performer (an actor or storyteller, whatever you want to call him) who recited a story mostly consisting of words of characters from the story of Renaud de Montauban (aka Rinaldo), moving around the meadow in front of no more than twenty spectators, but accompanied by a prompter who whispered in his ear, reading the words the reciter had to turn into a chant, naturally accompanying them with limited though intense gestures. It should be recalled that Maestro Cosimo mentioned by Pitrè had used a book as a prompt, but only for occasional use, for any moments of uncertainty. Here, though, prompting was permanent, the utterances being brief, their length being increased by a drawn out, monotonous chant, albeit subject to a strong rhythm, as if the storyteller wanted to confer on the words that he alone could hear a kind of religious tone rather than the coherence of a story. (29-30)

These might constitute some exceptional aspects of the rivalry/alliance between the written text and the voice: more common, at the beginning of the early modern era, was certainly the contemporary presence of the performer and his text in the squares and streets where the *cantari* were sung, or recited, with the aid of the ubiquitous ‘viola’: a phenomenon well illustrated in the essay by Luca Degl’Innocenti. But Molinari also quotes as customary the fact that the *canterino*, after singing his *cantare*, would sell the text of his performance to the audience, so that his verses, after being listened to, could be read calmly in silence (or maybe repeated aloud?).

The voice and the recitation of a literary text naturally imply the presence of a body. Here, once again, the domain of reading aloud borders dangerously on the domain of theatre. But in fact there are so many differences, and nuances, between the ability of a reader and the profession of an actor. Molinari is quick to remind us, in fact, that a substantial section of the *Institutio oratoria* by Quintilian deals with action, i.e. non-verbal communication or body language, of the orator: something – and someone – that is not (yet?) a true acting skill, or a fully professional actor. In this sense, the strange misreading of Livy by Nicholas Trevet, about the ancient actor Titus Andronicus, and the way the Latin comedies were performed, makes a further contribution to this subject: i.e., the possible splitting of the actor’s professional skills among different mimes or speakers. As Molinari recalls, Trevet wrote:

You should know that tragedies and comedies were acted as follows: the theatre was semi-circular, at the centre of which there was a booth called *scena* containing a pulpit from which the poet recited his lines; the mimes were outside, acting the words with gestures, associating them with the character concerned. (31n.)

This is a curious misunderstanding indeed: but it takes us back to a time where the different skills that we instinctively associate today with ‘acting’ could be considered separate, and linked to different typologies and levels of fruition of an ‘oral’ text.

Concerning the voice being separated from the body, and pronunciation from non-verbal communication, Molinari quotes the case of ‘Cimador, the son of the actor/clown Zuan Polo Liompardi’, who ‘imitated a whole troop of voices’ (according to Pietro Aretino) ‘from behind a door – or perhaps a curtain. Thus the “show” consisted of a voice, though one can imagine that the spectators gazed at that curtain, as though they were awaiting the appearance of those characters who sounded like a large group but were only a single individual’ (34). Which brings us, with a quite a vertiginous leap, to modern times, or rather, the possibility of a progressive disappearance of the body from the action of reading aloud. The curtain behind which Cimador used to hide can become the device which ‘reads’ to us, aloud, a text: pure voice, be it coming from the radio, an audiobook, or even a visual medium, where, however, the physical presence of the reciting person is no longer required. Reading aloud has become quite popular again: probably it has been the influence of modern media which has triggered the contemporary practice of public reading of classics, Dante *in primis* (at least in Italy). This opens a further question: is the ever-changing relationship between an ‘oral’ and a ‘written’ text also a reflection of a different, and yet parallel relationship, between illiterate people (the ones who could, and can, only ‘listen’) and literate people (the ones who could, and can, listen *and* read)? It is a loaded, and even disturbing question, which resurfaces more than once in the essays of the volume.

The essay by Luca Degl’Innocenti – ‘Singing and Printing Chivalric Poems in Early Modern Italy’ – while concentrating on a specific literary genre, on a specific literature and language, and on a specific span of time (essentially the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) deals with a question which is fundamental for the general subject developed in this volume. In other words, this contribution is presented as a case study, but its implications are also methodologically significant. Degl’Innocenti is well aware that he is dealing with a tradition

that had been intimately linked to orality since the dawn of time, so much so that research on oral poetry itself, as is well known, was born and has grown in close contact with that on epic traditions, both dead and alive, be it the Homeric poems, *Beowulf*, and the *chansons de geste*, or the poetry of modern-time Serbian *guslar*, West African *griot*, and Turkish *âşik*. (43)

And he is well aware that the prevalent position, within this field of study, has been, and is, quite sceptical about the actual possibility of orality: i.e., the possibility that epic Western poems could be created and performed without the aid of writing. From the very beginning of his article, Degl’Innocenti states his position quite clearly, which is exactly the opposite:

This text-centred approach may be right in many cases, but it might turn out to be rather overcautious and ultimately counterproductive in others, especially when a substantial body of textual and contextual evidence proves that orality (and vocality,

and aurality) played a very active role in the composition and circulation of a certain genre. In my experience, Italian chivalric poetry is a perfect case in point. In theory, literary scholars know well that during the first centuries of Italian literature the oral and the written dimensions were mutually, continuously, and deeply permeable; in practice, nevertheless, such awareness fades away into an inert historical background when examining specific texts and genres, which are interpreted only in terms of written texts and of interactions between them. (44-45)

The author, on the other hand, pleads vigorously for the vital, continuous presence of orality in the Italian tradition of chivalric *cantari* (a word which, after all, means nothing else, but ‘singing’), arguing for a fundamental principle: the distinction between ‘oral composition’ and ‘oral recitation’. Having demonstrated elsewhere that even Machiavelli was an improviser, Degl’Innocenti doesn’t shy away from affirming that ‘oral composition’ never died, and was very well alive even during the Renaissance; but, in particular, his point is ‘that a decline of oral composition does not imply a decline of oral recitation’ (45). In other words, even when poems were no longer composed *during* performance, and therefore they were not strictly speaking ‘oral poems’, they could still be mainly composed *in order to* be performed, at least through reading aloud, and in this sense their orality was real. This principle guides Degl’Innocenti in his investigation about the relationship between printing and reciting chivalric texts: once again, the ‘book’ and the ‘voice’ are here under scrutiny, not only as irreconcilable enemies, but also as allies – and not just occasional ones. The essay makes three main points: 1. ‘Chivalric poetry was still commonly and primarily performed in public both in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries’. 2. ‘Oral poetry and printed books were not at all on opposite fronts in the first decades of the Gutenberg era; on the contrary, they were very close allies’. 3. ‘Even from a textual point of view, the relationship between performed poems and printed ones could be much closer and more direct than we are used to thinking’ (47). The force of such arguments relies first of all on the anecdotal evidence of the widespread practice of singing aloud. Degl’Innocenti quotes two very humorous and well known *Facetiae* by Poggio Bracciolini which should be able to convince anyone of the popularity of the *canterini* in fourteenth-century Italy: the first one, ‘of the man who gets home from the piazza in speechless despair and barely finds the courage to confess to his worried wife the daunting news he just heard from a ‘cantor’, that the paladin Roland is dead’; and that of ‘the man who ruins himself by paying day by day a special reward to a street entertainer who sings the deeds of Hector, if only he postpones the instalment in which the Trojan hero must die’ (47). But, beyond such colourful accounts, which demonstrate the ongoing success of chivalric public recitations in Renaissance Italy, it is mainly in the painstaking reconstruction and reconsideration of certain obscure, but indeed illuminating figures active in the field of chivalric literature between the end of the fourteenth and the first decades of the fifteenth centuries,

which sheds a clear light over the cultural panorama we are observing here. The lives and activities of individuals like Antonio da Guido, Jacopo Coppa, and especially – the most controversial, but the most fascinating of them all – ‘Zoppino’, eloquently demonstrate that a powerful synergy between the printing industry and vocality was at work from the very beginning of the Gutenberg era:

In late fifteenth-century Florence the art of printing itself was first imported by the most famous street singer of his age, Antonio di Guido . . . , and the account books of printing shops such as the Ripoli press (based in a convent near Santa Maria Novella) were soon dotted with names of charlatans and street singers (*ciurmadori* and *cantimpanca*) who reportedly bought dozens of copies of popular books, including many short chivalric romances, for the evident purpose of selling them during their performances. (48)

Degl’Innocenti demonstrates beyond any doubt that

By the early sixteenth century, it was far from unusual for *cantimpanca* also to do business as regular publishers and booksellers: such is the case, for instance, of the Florentine Zanobi della Barba, who published no less than 30 titles in the 1500s and 1510s . . . , and of numerous peers of his in central and northern Italy, like Paolo Danza, Ippolito Ferrarese, Francesco Faentino, Jacopo Coppa called ‘Il Modenese’, and Paride Mantovano called ‘Il Fortunato’. (48-49)

But, as already observed, the most intriguing case is that of Zoppino: well documented as a publisher, but only recently revealed by Massimo Rospocher in his identity as a *cantimpanca*. The symbiosis between the profession of printer and that of public reciter could not be better exemplified – with telling consequences on the evaluation of well-known techniques of the narrative chivalric code. For example, the continuous interruption of the narrative, that is, the fundamental axiom of *entrelacement*, in the poems of Boiardo and Ariosto, appears not to be just a typical device of simulated orality, but the reflection of an actual performative mode of the cantimbanchi. Degl’Innocenti quotes a malicious passage in Piero Aretino’s *Dialogues of Nanna and Pippa*, where Zoppino is cited as a paradigm of the charlatans’ mastery in enthralling the audience and playing with the dynamics of pleasure postponement. But, what is even more curious, Nanna quotes Zoppino’s ability as an example for the technique of sexual pleasure postponement that Pippa, if she wants to be a good courtesan, must learn:

You know that Zoppino sang the tale up to the midway point; and when he had gathered a mob about him, he would turn his cape inside out and before getting set to finish the tale, he wanted to peddle a thousand other trifles . . . Well, saying ‘I don’t want to’ and ‘I can’t’ just at the sweet climax, are in fact like the recipes that Zoppino gets down to sell, when he leaves the delighted crowd high and dry by cutting short his story of Campriano. (51n.)

Which is no less than funny, since the technique of *entrelacement* has been in turn compared to sexual pleasure postponement in Daniel Javitch's well-known essay entitled '*Cantus interruptus*'. The last point touched upon by Degl'Innocenti in his article is a final re-evaluation of the problem of texts vocally performed – for sure – but also orally composed. The solution proposed here is, let us say, moderate. Degl'Innocenti does not dismiss the idea that a *cantimpanca* could actually compose his script during the performance, but 'not ex nihilo': that is, taking advantage of a baggage of topoi, and tropoi, amassed in his memory, from the reading of written and printed texts (something very similar, in other words, to the improvisational technique of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, as interpreted by Molinari in the previous essay). Conversely, Degl'Innocenti's article agrees with the old proposal of Domenico de Robertis, who imagined *cantari* composed 'a tavolino': some sort of 'performance at the desk', 'a sort of *in vitro* reproduction, quill in hand in facing a blank page, of an actual oral performance, bow in hand in front of an audience' (55-56). Finally, the ultimate word is that we should never consider the 'book' as a drastic alternative to 'performance', and silent reading as the enemy of reading aloud. The very special case of Cristoforo l'Altissimo teaches us that what is interesting is to investigate the numerous and sometimes surprising ways in which these two phenomena interact. A whole cycle of recitations by Altissimo (from the *Reali di Francia* by Andrea da Barberino), in fact, had the very special destiny of being reported in writing (in real time) and then printed, many years after they were actually performed, without revision by the author: they keep all the marks of orality that we can expect from this kind of transcription. On the other hand, when Altissimo himself printed his *Rotta di Ravenna*, he accurately erased the most obvious oral traits of his text, trying to transform it into a 'legitimate' literary work. Once again, improvisation, memory, transcription, print, play together a game much more complex than the supporters of orality *vs* the book – or vice-versa – could ever imagine.

The essay by this writer, 'Voices from the New World: Giuliano Dati's *La storia della inventione delle nuove insule di Channaria indiane*' is an apt case-study within the larger frame built up by Degl'Innocenti's article. It deals with two documents, two poetic texts in octaves, both related to the discovery of the New World: a *cantare* by the Florentine Giuliano Dati, which recasts the Letter of Christopher Columbus to Luis de Santángel (or/and to Raphael Sanchez), and a chapter of the *Libro dell'Universo* ('Book of the Universe') by Matteo Fortini, another Florentine, which re-writes the Letter of Vespucci to Soderini announcing the discovery of a 'mondo nuovo'. And yet, these two literary productions, so symmetrical in that they both take advantage of the first 'news' related to so great an event, share little besides their metrical structure. In fact, they neatly show the pliable nature of the 'octave' at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries: Dati's work is an independent text, truly intended to be 'sung'; Fortini's work, on the other

hand, is just an expansion within a long, complex, rhymed treatise; Dati's *cantare* enjoyed quite remarkable success as a published text (there were three editions – that we are aware of – in the year 1493 alone: one in Rome, by E. Silber, on 15th June; a second in Florence, by 'Johannes dictus florentinus', on 25th October, and a third one in Florence again, publisher unknown, on 26th October); Fortini's report, on the other hand, was buried within the pages of the manuscript of the *Libro dell'Universo*, and only in recent times has been printed and made accessible to a larger audience. In this sense, the opposition between the two 'poetic' translations of Columbus' and Vespucci's announcements could not be starker. Dati constantly addresses an audience of listeners (*auditore* is a word disseminated all through the text, and at the end of his *cantare* the author explicitly mentions a crowd of 'Magnific'e discreti circhunstanti' – 'Magnificent and kind people, gathered around'; 72n.); Fortini, on the contrary, continually conjures up an audience of 'readers'. But, once again: given this basic distinction, and established without any doubt the nature of Dati's text as a 'script' to be recited, we are not authorized to conclude that Giuliano Dati was in fact a *canterino*. His *Storia della invention delle nuove insule di Channaria indiane* is actually a perfect example of what Luca Degl'Innocenti, echoing a suggestion of Domenico De Robertis, has dubbed 'performance at the desk'. Giuliano Dati was a prelate, a dignified member of the court of Pope Alexander VI, and the author of a substantial body of *cantari* (*Historia e leggenda di San Biagio*, 1492-1493, *Historia di Sancta Maria de Loreto*, 1492-1493, *Stazioni e indulgenze di Roma*, 1492-1493, *La Magna Lega and Il Diluvio di Roma*, both printed in 1495-1496, *Leggenda di S. Barbara*, 1494, *Storia di S. Job profeta*, 1495), all of them printed – in fact, the author seems to have accurately cultivated the publication of his works, taking prompt advantage of the newly available technology. Not a 'singer' himself (at least, as far as we know), that does not imply, though, that Dati did not intend his *cantari* to be sung, but simply read. On the contrary, we are witnessing here a typical case of a body of texts composed scrupulously following the format of oral texts, but not – this is the argument of the essay – as a pure fictive literary device, but as a real compliance to the demands of an actual oral purpose of these texts. On this assumption, the essay proceeds in detecting the oral marks of Dati's *cantare*, in a close, constant comparison with its Latin source – since Dati did not follow the original text by Columbus, but its Latin translation by the humanist Leandro de Cosco (even though there is some evidence of Dati's possible knowledge of the Spanish text). Among these features, the most characteristic are the oscillation between the management of the narrative by the *canterino* himself, and his surrender to the voice of Columbus (with a consequent, curious passage from the plural 'voi', when it is the singer who addresses his crowd, to the singular 'tu', when it is Columbus who addresses his king, the official addressee of the original letter); the clumsy repetition of information, especially at the beginning of the *cantare*; and Dati's dissection, and re-assembling, of the 'narrative cells'

of the original narrative in a different order (a phenomenon that has already been noticed, but that is painstakingly reconstructed in this essay in its systematic procedure). Can we detect a real 'strategy' in all this? Something resembling a 'poetics'? Up to a certain point. The final conclusion of the essay limits itself to an idea of a poetics of 'confusion':

... the dismembering and reassembling of the original text does not seem to follow an alternative compositional plan. Instead, the impression one gets is that Giuliano Dati scribbled down the most interesting bits of information he could glean from his source and then assembled them in his *cantare* without any scruples about fidelity to the structural order of the text he was transforming. The new disorder, shall we say, of the text was apparently of no importance to Giuliano Dati. He knew that what was important was to communicate in the most interesting, vibrant, exciting manner a bundle of information, information that his listeners would have neither the time nor attention to scrutinize for inconsistencies. (93-94)

After all, the author himself, in a sudden access of naïveté and sincerity affirms towards the end of his endeavour: 'inanzi voglio confuso esser nel dire/ ch'i' voglia alchuna cosa preterire' ('I would rather be confused in my words, but without leaving out anything that I have to say'). 'Perhaps we can be so bold as to read these lines as Dati's declaration of poetics. We might call "confusion" the creative hallmark of the *canterino* style' (94).

Christopher Geekie's "Parole appiastricciate": The Question of Recitation in the Tasso-Ariosto Polemic' dwells, one more time in this volume, on texts in octaves, produced in Renaissance Italy. But with Geekie's contribution we are very far away from the clumsy *canterino* style of Giuliano Dati. Geekie transports the reader to the opposite end of the fortune, in Italy, of the poems in octaves. He deals with the most sophisticated, learned literary product of that format: Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, and the heated debates that this poem triggered among the Italian literati of the time. It is a field of study which has enjoyed much scholarly attention, from both sides of the Atlantic: the Italian mid-sixteenth century discussions about 'epos' and 'romanzo' are by now recognized as nothing less than a precocious, brilliant laboratory (or incubator) of modern narratology. Scholars, though, have concentrated their attention especially on the subjects of *materia* and *favola*, i.e. the question of the structure of the narrative text; much less emphasis has been accorded to the problems of style, or 'elocution', that is the actual 'sound' of Renaissance poems. In this sense, Geekie's contribution is a novelty, since it digs out a particular, yet very telling moment of the polemics which accompanied the shocking – for the time – emergence of a poem like Tasso's *Liberata*. In general, what was discussed in these polemics was the relationship of Tasso's poem with Ariosto's; or his more or less rigorous compliance with the new rules dictated by the re-discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*. But the Florentine Accademia della Crusca – the arch enemy of the novelties introduced by Tasso

in his poem – also attacked the *Liberata* on another front. In the words of the ‘cruscante’ Lionardo Salviati:

‘[The poem] has neither beautiful words, nor beautiful figures of speech ... and both are beyond any natural manner of speaking. They are bound together in such a distorted, harsh, forced, and unpleasant way that, upon hearing these words recited by someone else, rarely does one understand them, and it is necessary to take the book in hand and read the words on our own. These words are such, that sound and voice are not enough, and to understand them you must see the writing. Sometimes even that is not enough.’ (100n.)

The target of the criticism by the Florentines are the so called *parole appiasticciate*, or *mashed-up words*, of which these malevolent readers provide quite a colourful list: *checcanuto*, *impastacani*, *crinchincima*, etc. It is quite a humorous move, but a very significant one. First of all, it implies a consideration of the epic text of the *Liberata* as one made not just to be read, but to be read aloud, to be recited: because only the ‘voice’ could produce such cacophonies: the reader does not even perceive them. And this is the point of Geekie’s article: what kind of ‘reading aloud’ of the text did the Crusca have in mind? Can we only consider their observations the fruit of a biased, malevolent attitude against Tasso’s poem? This was, naturally, the stance of Tasso’s defenders: they stated, in general, that only by ignoring the punctuation, the rhythm of the verse, and only purposely obeying the metric elisions of the words, could one obtain the distorted, almost comical readings of the Crusca. But according to Geekie ‘the Crusca’s combination of entire phrases into single nonsense words occurs as a result of several reading strategies’ (105). Essentially, the Crusca applied to Tasso’s verses a pure metrical reading: ‘An analysis of the metrical schemes that emerge in these mashed-up words will reveal a particular mode of reading lines of poetry that emphasizes regular accentuation at the expense of both the sense of the line and its graphical representation’ (106-107). In a way, the counter-objections of Tasso’s advocates, like Camillo Pellegrino, seem obvious:

‘if one word is separated from another, and uttered with a pause, then they will not produce an ugly sound, especially in those positions in the verse, where it is possible, or where it is praiseworthy, to do so. In those positions where it is necessary to combine words, rarely does Tasso join together two sounds whose pronunciation ends up sounding ugly. On the contrary, there are words, which the academicians call ‘mashed-up’, which sound most sweet. But, by God, what are these monstrous transformations of Tasso’s words that make children of rage from children of grace?’ (108n.)

What is culturally significant, though, is that the purely metrical reading of the Crusca is deemed by the cruscanti *naturale*: as if this were the only spontaneous manner of pronouncing aloud a poetic text. The conflict here is

not only between two ways of reciting poetry aloud, but between two different ways of simply ‘speaking’: one of Tasso’s defenders negatively associates the ‘mispronouncing’ of the Crusca with the bad habit of speaking in an incomprehensible way censured in Della Casa’s *Galateo*. Thus, the ‘parole appiasticciate’ of the Crusca’s reading of Tasso’s poem are assimilated, *tout court*, with the ugly pronunciation of those who do not know how to talk and interact in a social environment. On a larger scale, this whole polemic reveals a strong tension between the way a late Renaissance poem could be perceived (as a text to be read, and/or a text that could be recited); between a text as a visual product, where comprehension is helped by a whole series of graphic conventions, and a text as pure sound, subjected to a plurality of possible executions, and fruitions. After all, the conflict between a ‘metric’ reading and a reading ‘ad sensum’ is at the core, even today, of the curriculum of every Actor’s School.

Ecclesia non theatrale negotium est: ‘The Church is no show business’. St Ambrose’s words resonated for centuries, drawing – it seemed – an unsurpassable line between the sacred space of religion and the secular space of the stage. But, in reality, as the essay by Teresa Megale – ‘Animated Pulpits: On Performative Preaching in seventeenth-century Naples’ – demonstrates, that border was very weak, and various figures of performers, especially in the Baroque era, used to go across it with surprising ease. A colourful anecdote reported by Benedetto Croce (we are in Naples, after all) says it all: we are in the streets of the city, where the conflicting performances of Pulcinella and a religious preacher are taking place: ‘The former allegedly attracted crowds with his irresistible gags, laughter overpowering catechism to the extent of making the preacher, who was so outclassed and humiliated, unsuccessfully try to dissuade the onlookers, by shouting: “Over here – this is the real Pulcinella!”’. As Megale notes, ‘The scene of a preacher outclassed by an actor, ... probably never took place’, and yet, it is ‘symptomatic of performative psychotechniques widely employed to attract (and maintain) the hearers’ attention’ (132), both in a sacred and in a secular space. The fact is that these spaces, as shown by this anecdote, were not so separate, even in a physical sense. The street was the competing arena of many performers: charlatans, actors, and preachers too. On the other hand, the ‘proper’ religious space for preachers – the Church – was, pace St Ambrose, very much prone itself to the show: in the ‘protective semi-darkness of churches’ (129-130), in the dim light of candles, the Neapolitan preachers of the seventeenth century were no less actors than their secular counterparts: indeed, someone lamented that, in comparison, ‘in the leading theatres, he heard the faded, weak voices of the actors, while those of the preachers in Catholic churches were worthy of the best theatrical professionals’ (132). Not only that: the technique of *reportatio*, i.e. the transcription, in real time, of the words uttered by the preacher, was a custom no less common in churches than in theatres, where specialized stenographers were able to ‘steal’ the texts while they

were performed: ‘... while the preacher pronounced his words resounding with Catholic teaching, a scribe often squatting on the pulpit steps, half-hidden from the throng of the faithful, wrote them down, amid the flickering of candles and clouds of incense’ (131). The permeability between the pulpit and the stage, after all, is clearly demonstrated by those who personally shifted allegiance between the two professions: ‘Before becoming lay brethren attached to the order of Piarist fathers who preached to the populace in the Duchesca district, Andrea della Valle, Francesco Longavilla, and Orazio Graziullo were, respectively, the impresario and actors at the “stanza della Duchesca” venue, opened in 1613 in the district of the same name, and in operation successfully up to 1626’ (131). And not only that: not only opposition could convert into allegiance, but even into a sort of overt complementarity. Megale quotes, in this sense, some eloquent written documents, which aimed to teach the art of performance both to secular actors and religious speakers, or introduce the spectacular character of the baroque theatre into the sacred spaces of religion:

It is enough to mention *I divini spettacoli nella notte di Natale* (‘The Divine Performances on Christmas Eve’), and *Il Mostro scatenato per le Quarant’ore del carnevale* (‘The Monster Let Loose for the 40 Hours of Carnival’) in the *Orationi sacre* by Azzolini (1633) to understand, beginning with the titles, the close link of the sacred with the profane, pulpit with stage. This was clearly visible in the continual crossover between the two phenomena: methods and techniques were taken from the theatre, but with selective eyes and ears. Even Louis de Cressolles, when, in his *Vacationes autumnales* (1620), he recorded the preacher’s repertoire of gestures, prescribed that the latter should avoid certain examples of the actor’s body language: the head not moving up and down, for example, a typical stance of the comic Zannis in the *Commedia dell’Arte*. (134)

And yet, we can infer, from the examples quoted by Megale, that such ‘infractions’ must have been quite common, and that all resources of baroque theatricality, in fact, infiltrated the preaching technique of Neapolitan preachers. The final example cited by Megale, of the Redemptorist Father Ludovico Antonelli, is conclusively persuasive. The use of a skull, on the pulpit, as a true theatrical prop, says it all: a prop to which, when turned towards the audience, the preacher himself lent his own voice, with a chilling ‘special effect’ nothing short of the most elementary, but suggestive stage tricks.

The following essay, by Antonella Giordano, pushes the subject of ‘literature aloud’ into the eighteenth century, dealing with the phenomenon of women improvisers. The title, which borrows a verse from a sonnet by Vittorio Alfieri in praise of one of these performers – ‘“Donna il cui carne gli animi soggioga”’. Eighteenth-Century Italian Women Improvisers’ – clearly declares the span and limits of this contribution: the time, the type of performing technique, the language and geography (Italian) considered, and finally the gender choice of the author of this essay. Male improvisers, and very famous ones, abounded in the eighteenth century: among them, even Pietro Metastasio in his youth

– Metastasio, to whom we owe one of the most beautiful definitions of this profession: ‘inutile e meraviglioso mestiere’ (‘useless and marvellous art’). But Giordano concentrates on female improvisers, and, namely, on the three most famous of them: Maria Maddalena Morelli (Corinna Olimpica), Teresa Bandettini, and Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher. Giordano’s contribution, thus, also crosses the field of gender studies, contaminating the inquiry about the peculiarities of this ‘inutile mestiere’ with the further ‘oddity’ constituted by the fact that the improvisers dealt with here are women. In any case, a preliminary clarification is necessary. As Giordano rightly reminds us, eighteenth century ‘improvisation’ is very different from the improvisation of the previous centuries – which is the object of reflection in many pages of this volume. The difference is, first of all, that the act of improvising in the eighteenth century leaves the streets, the piazza, open spaces, or even the theatre (if we want to consider the *Commedia dell’Arte* as a pure form of improvisation): in the eighteenth century the most famous improvisers would perform in private or semi-private spaces, in front of an audience gathered at the command of a patron (or patroness) who was the host of the event. This ambiance, infinitely more protected, and this kind of audience, in general carefully selected, allowed another seminal characteristic of the more modern art of improvisation: the performer would actually ‘improvise’ on a subject suggested, on the spot, by a member of the audience. His/her ability consisted exactly in the capacity of ‘composing’ poetry with very little time – or none – for reflection and preparation, almost under the spell of a rapturous inspiration. This was the element that triggered the almost fanatical admiration that accompanied such performances and that Giordano vividly describes in her essay, quoting an archival document, as rare as it is totally explicit about the nature of the phenomenon: the reportage (in the form of a letter by a Dr. Piccioli from Lucca to his friend Giovanni Rosini) of a combined performance by Bandettini and Fantastici:

Dear friend, I have just left like a madman, a fanatic, overwhelmed and almost delirious by the famous improvisation. What beauty, what magnificent, unrepeatable, divine things I heard this evening! Never will I experience anything like it again ... The theme was requested; nobody spoke. Alfieri, from his corner, said ‘Let us start with the Rape of Europa’. This theme was unacceptable, since it could not be conducted as a dialogue, as they wished. So Hero and Leander was suggested. Fantastici began in the role of Leander very well. Bandettini also did well in the role of Hero. I cannot tell you how well both contestants did, how the dialogue was to the point and how interesting it was. They were both well applauded. One seemed to instil the other with courage ... then Alfieri’s theme was recited by Bandettini. My friend, her words were incredible. What vivid descriptions. She depicted a bull finer than that of Ovid’. (148n.)

The sex of the performers, naturally, adds to this subject another layer of interest. Here ‘reciting aloud’, once again, reveals its risky vicinity with the actual performance of professional actors. This vicinity is particularly

dangerous when the figures involved are female, given the usually very poor moral reputation of professional actresses – despite the centuries-old repeated attempts (from Isabella Andreini on) to establish, defend and demonstrate the possibility of a perfectly moral private life of the ‘women of theatre’. But, as Giordano demonstrates, it was not just a question of morality. The three women improvisers here considered went a long way to keep, and validate, their status of honourable women, accurately trying to distinguish themselves from ‘real’ actresses: after all, they never performed on regular stages. And yet, theirs was a real profession, and they were paid for it: once again, it was difficult to trace rigorous lines of demarcation between ‘reciting’ and ‘acting’. What is more interesting, though, is the consideration that these women had of their repertoire. This had nothing to do, naturally, with the repertoire of regular theatres, which was the product of illustrious (male) writers. Sure, as Giordano observes a propos of this female professional figure, ‘Her repertoire was grounded in solid academic study and general knowledge, enabling her to deal with any subject proposed, good knowledge of metre, so as to create her verse quickly, and a good memory’ (143). But, tellingly,

both Amarilli and Corilla refused to publish the transcriptions of their improvisations, imagining the risk of transferring to the page and print poems composed for listeners. Extempore poetry is a violent, impetuous exercise which can give rise to marvellous though intermittent, random results and does not produce permanent values. Proud of their talents, but also quite aware of the specificity and limits of their art, both of them realised that it was impossible to preserve its merits beyond a public performance. (152)

In conclusion, the ‘useless and marvellous art’ of improvisation is probably the most eloquent specimen of a ‘literature aloud’ destined to evaporate without leaving behind any trace (not even something similar to the *canovacci* of the *Commedia dell’Arte*). The presence of female figures of limited education in this scenario (Bandettini had been nothing more than an illiterate dancer, before her success as an improviser) simply accentuates this characteristic of this intrinsically evanescent phenomenon. Very well conscious of the ephemeral quality of their success, these intelligent women kept themselves cautiously away from any pretension of immortal fame as writers. For them, the fanatical admiration of their listeners was enough – and they knew it.

The last contribution to this volume – ‘Reading Aloud in Britain in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: Teories and Beyond’, by Roberta Mullini – might appear to revolve around a very specific subject: the phenomenon of British ‘elocutionism’ in late eighteenth century. In fact, Mullini’s essay faces fundamental questions raised by the relationship between written and oral texts, or rather, by the usage of written/printed texts as scripts, outside, though, the professional space of the stage. In other words, Mullini’s contribution addresses the basic issues of the very subject of ‘literature aloud’. The ‘elocutionst’ movement is reconstructed here primarily following the texts

and the activity of its protagonists: Vicesimus Knox, the very successful author, in the mid-Eighties, of *Elegant Extracts: Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars at Classical and Other Schools in the Art of Speaking, in Reading, Thinking, Composing; and in the Conduct of Life*; Thomas Sheridan, author of *British Education: or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain. Being an Essay towards proving, that the Immorality, Ignorance, and false Taste, which so generally prevail, are the natural and necessary Consequences of the present defective System of Education. With an Attempt to shew, that a Revival of the Art of Speaking, and the Study of our own Language, might contribute, in great measure, to the Cure of those Evil* (1756; and this is not even the complete title. . .); John Walker, author of *Elements of Elocution* (1781), and of a very influential *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791); plus, a series of booklets in Sheridan's wake, in general 'reading miscellanies', some of them, again, with eloquent titles (*A collection of Poems for Reading and Repetition*, *The Speaker*, and so on). All this quite massive, and impressive, production, culminated, right at the end of the century (1799), in the anonymous *The Reader or Reciter*: a title that seems to summarize the equivalence between the act of 'reading' and the act of 'reciting', that is, reading aloud, making explicit the ambiguity of the term itself (what do we mean by 'reading'? A silent, or a vocal activity? The 'elocutionists', obviously, had no doubt about it). This phenomenon is linked to the impetuous growth, in England, of a voracious audience of consumers of literature: not only read in private, but in public, to an audience. As a consequence, being able to speak clearly, correctly, with the right intonation, became a requirement for social acceptance and success: the quotation from a letter by Elizabeth Montagu, that Mullini has put as an epigraph to her essay, says it all: 'Mr Hay is an auditor, for he is not able to read aloud'. It is to help all the Mister Hays to transcend the role of a passive 'auditor', into that of an effective speaker, that so many efforts – and books, and booklets – were produced. The stress was on pronunciation, of course, but also, inevitably, on body language. As Mullini emphasizes,

in 1762 Sheridan published *A Course of Lectures on Elocution*, in which he expounded his theories about delivery, including not only pronunciation and grammatical correctness, but also everything that might contribute to effectiveness, i.e. emphasis, tones, pauses, pitch, gesture . . . all the tools a reader/speaker has in order to convey passions beyond literal meanings. (163)

Which, naturally, raises again the old problem: the fragile, porous, risky borders between the reading aloud of a common speaker, and the actual performance of an actor. The 'elocutionists', though, did not seem so worried or disturbed by the siege of the professionals; actually, they willingly overcame the border themselves, very well aware of the possible, positive, reciprocal influence of 'secular' elocution and theatrical performance. In Walker's book, for example, 'each passion is exemplified by dramatic passages, generally drawn from Shakespeare', to the point that 'this part of Walker's text best resembles a

handbook for drama students rather than a series of instructions for “simple” readers’ (167); Sheridan trained not only common speakers, but also young actors, well convinced that ‘the Theatre would become an admirable Assistant to the School of Oratory, by furnishing to the young Students constant good Models and Examples in all the different species of Eloquence’ (162). The least intimidated by the possible contamination of the common reader by his resemblance to an actor seems to be (maybe not surprisingly) the anonymous author of *The Reader or Reciter*: he does not recoil from giving ‘instruction for reading plays’, exposing the costume of reading aloud, in private settings, texts destined to the actual stage; as Mullini observes, in this author’s view, ‘a reader ought to create a “stage” (a scene) in the hearer’s imagination, while actors perform on a stage whose scenery already shows places and venues to the onlookers. In a way, readers’ responsibility is even greater than actors’ when creating “aural” settings’ (172-173). The fluid passage between ‘reading’ and ‘performing’, in conclusion, seems to have been encouraged, and not curbed, by the elocutionist movement.

Mullini’s essay leads to a last, and crucial, question associated with the habit of reading aloud: the relationship of this habit with literacy – or rather, illiteracy. Quoting Adam Fox, Mullini asserts that even when most people were still illiterate, ‘Reading aloud helped to draw everyone into the ambit of the written word’, adding that ‘public places such as taverns, barber shops and, especially, coffee-houses offered the illiterate the opportunity to listen to somebody reading aloud the various printed materials available in those venues’ (158). At the end of her essay, Mullini concludes that

Eighteenth-century British society lived through an era of vast improvement of literacy, especially in the middle class, and of female literacy, so that the century’s great novels were certainly written not only for silent reading but with an ‘ear’ to family and shared readings, when possibly illiterate servants might as well be present. The now nearly lost practice of reading aloud created and reinforced sociability, while – at the same time – allowing the illiterate to access literature and any other printed material. (174)

This certainly sounds like a very happy ending for the research conducted in this volume. The only thing one is much tempted to peek beyond the time limits of this research is to reflect on what has happened after the scene here described. One wonders if those servants, those women, those poor people remained listeners, or if they finally learned how to read themselves; if to be listening truly introduced them to literature, or kept them content in their semi-ignorance; and, regarding today, one might consider how to judge the reduced habit of reading silently, privately, while ‘listening’ seems – again – so pervasive, so triumphant. Molinari, in his introductory essays, touched on these issues: it was not planned, but maybe inevitable, that they had to resurface at the end of this intellectual journey.

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