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Autor: Nänny, Max
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Narrative and Modes of Communication

Max Nänny

After a comparison of Martin *Chuzzlewit* (1844) with *Dombey and Son* (1846) Walter Allen concludes in his *The English Novel*: "And the railway killed the picaresque novel."¹

Allen's conclusion is based on the fact that *Chuzzlewit*, which is full of comic and melodramatic scenes with coaches and chaises, was the last novel Dickens wrote with relatively little view of what John Forster, using a railway-metaphor, called "the main track of his design."

As Dickens's last episodic narrative, *Chuzzlewit* still belongs, in Chesterton's words, to "a rank, rowdy, jolly tradition, of men falling off coaches, before the sons of Science and the Great Exhibition began to travel primly on rails – or grooves."²

In Dickens's next novel, *Dombey*, however, whose publication not only coincided with the climax of the Victorian railway mania in the middle forties but whose structuring and symbolic metaphor is the railway, we no longer find the old, loose, episodic or picaresque narrative but a more formal, almost linear plot to which everything is subordinated.³

I have chosen this example because, unlike most studies of narrative, Allen's hypothesis assumes the impact of something *external* to narrative on its *internal* structure. And although Allen's assumption is difficult to prove, the similarities between different external modes of communication and the corresponding narrative forms are striking.

Thus the leisurely stage-coach on its adventurous course from inn to inn along the meandering country roads of England as well as the

¹ Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 170.

² Quoted by Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (London, 1976; 1942), p. 135.

³ Interestingly enough, this narrative dissimilarity is even reflected on the cover-design of the monthly parts. Whereas the cover-design of *Chuzzlewit* is built up on a system of simple contrasts without a narrative line running through the disconnected visual symbols, the *Dombey* cover has such a line, which, according to Butt and Tillotson, "also suggests part of the moral curve of the narrative" (John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* [London, 1957], p. 93).

haphazard urban pedestrianism that goes with it – “Walking *without any definite object* through St. Paul’s Churchyard,” Dickens reports in *Sketches by Boz*, “we *happened* to turn down a street ...”⁴ – seem to have found an adequate, even homomorphic narrative reflection in the flexible form of the episodic, picaresque novel.

The railway, however, which assured a speedy, unadventurous journey from town to town along trunk-lines of smooth linear tracks through tunnels and across viaducts seems to have found its narrative equivalent in a more formal, linear plot.

But my main concern is not the narrative reflection of modes of transport but the external constraints imposed by the various *verbal* modes of communication.

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Let me first turn to the mode of *oral* communication. The spoken word in a non-literate or semi-literate culture with a living oral tradition has a thorough shaping effect on narrative form.

As Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, Eric Havelock and others have shown,⁵ oral narrative not only has the important educational task of transmitting the tribal encyclopedia from generation to generation but it is also characterized by its *composition in performance*.

To make this possible, oral narrative assists the memorization of the living word by every possible mnemonic device: This is why it uses *standard* rhythms, *standard* formulas and *standard* themes, which it connects by a paratactic sequence, an adding style or *episodic* principle, while the compendious plot serves as an over-all reference frame.

In his *The Epic in Africa* Isidore Okpewho has explained the value of the episodic plot for an oral bard: “When the bard may not have the time or encouragement to sing the entire story, he can select those segments of it that time will allow or that can appeal to the special tastes of his audience. In fact, there may never be time enough on one occasion to sing all of a full-length heroic song; the periodic elevations in the tempo of the narrative thus represent the physical divisions of it into episodes and may help the bard to make the choice, when the time

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (Oxford, 1969), p. 86 (my italics).

⁵ See especially Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford, 1963); Joseph Russo and Bennett Simon, “Homeric Psychology and the Oral Epic Tradition”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, 4 (Oct./Dec., 1968), pp. 483–498; Michael Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study of the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974).

comes, as to which part or parts of the song to sing and where to begin his singing. The point is worth noting because it seriously questions the validity of applying Aristotelian notions of unity to an oral performance in a creative tradition. The bard may have the broad lines of the plot of the story in his mind; but, because he seldom sings the song in its entirety, each episode has its own integral logic and appeal which may or may not agree impeccably with those of another. This may be one more reason why Homer 'nods', and other epic bards get the details and logic of their songs mixed up now and then."⁶

Thus due to its recreative composition in performance the outward form of oral narrative is ever changing while its essence remains: oral narrative has a "fluid gestalt" (Nagler), it is multiform. And, as David Buchan expounds, the "fixity of text" came in with literacy: "A literate mind assumes that a story and the words in which it is told are, and must be, the same. The oral mind does not subscribe to this belief; the oral composer aims at stability of story, not stability of text."⁷

Furthermore, to permit the mnemonically important processes of identification on the part of the audience, oral narrative tends towards the animation and personification of inanimate objects: everything is seen in terms of agents and actions.

Oral narrative also favours "heavy", i. e. memorable characters such as heroes and gods. These are often in an agonistic relationship that permits a dualistic division of everything into good or bad.⁸ Oral narrative, by the same token, exploits the memorability of all forms of violence such as battle-scenes, murders and mutilations.⁹

⁶ *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York, 1979), p. 218.

⁷ "Oral Tradition and Literary Tradition: The Scottish Ballads", in *Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition: A Symposium* (Odense, 1977), p. 59. Buchan also points to the oral narrative technique of "ring composition" or the annular device of framing which is not only a characteristic element of Homeric poetry but also occurs in the ballad. "Basically," Buchan writes, "the frame's function is to hold the material together in a kind of narrative vice; the frames are ... like a pair of aural bookends" (p. 66).

⁸ The dualistic or polarized world view of tribal or oral cultures has been impressively demonstrated by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. These cultures are ideal objects for investigations in terms of binary oppositions.

⁹ See Eugene Vance, "Roland and the Poetics of Memory", *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca, N. Y., 1979), pp. 374-403: "Thus violence may be understood as being not only the 'subject' of oral epic narrative but also as aide-mémoire or as a 'generative' force in the production of its discourse. By extension, it is interesting to ask if the semiological prominence given to vio-

But oral narrative also encourages extreme verbal visualization. Thus, it is not only rich in images and similes but it exteriorizes inner mental processes as personified interchanges between e.g. a hero and a god. Hence, private thoughts are turned into a public view of things.

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The narrative constraints exerted by oral communication are made excessive by African talking drums, as has been shown by Walter J. Ong.¹⁰

Now drum talk imitates a tonal language by means of a "male" or low tone and a "female" or high tone. Due to the limited number of signs of the binary code of drum communication there is an imperative need for disambiguation. To achieve this, expressions in a binary code have to be very long in order to be relatively unambiguous. Thus, to choose a more familiar example, the signal "SOS" in the binary code of Morse needs three times as many signs as the non-binary alphabet. In consequence, drum narratives are about eight times longer than spoken narratives. And like narratives in the oral tradition they also rely on *standard* (or old) themes, on *standard* qualifiers, formulaic expression, on "heavy" or ceremonial characters, on a thorough polarization of life in terms of praise and blame. Non-standard or new themes, new categories, non-dualistic gradations of evaluation or sophisticated shadings in characterization are impossible because this would entail more and more involved expression. But the involution and lengthening of expression has certain limits. Hence, the peculiarly conservative, standardized nature of drum communication, of oral narrative generally.

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The sharp contrast between an oral and a written narrative can be seen when Homer's *Odyssee* is compared with Joyce's *Ulysses*. The most profound of all of Joyce's Homeric transformations is, as Hugh Kenner has remarked, that the text of *Ulysses* is "not organized in memory and unfolded in time, but organized and unfolded in what we may call

lence in classical and post-classical culture [...] was not primarily mnemonic in function [...]. In a commemorative culture, then, history 'stages' itself around events of violence by which collective judicial memory reinforces itself – as narrative" (p. 383).

¹⁰ See Walter J. Ong, "African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics", in his *Interfaces of the Word* (London, 1977), pp. 92–120.

technological space: on printed pages for which it was designed from the beginning.”¹¹

Joyce’s literate transformation of an oral narrative may, for instance, be seen in the replacement of standard formulas in Homer by the unique *mot juste*; in the substitution of standard themes by highly particularized events and individualized experiences; in the replacement of pervasive externalizations natural to oral narrative by Joyce’s extreme internalizations of the stream of consciousness meant for readers and not listeners. “In *Ulysses*,” Russo and Simon write, “... a stream-of-consciousness narrative is used with the immediate intention of communicating the most personal and idiosyncratic aspects of a character’s mental life. Homer, on the contrary, casts all potentially idiosyncratic mental states into the mold of traditional language and image.”¹²

In yet another literate transformation of the oral encyclopedia, namely Ezra Pound’s “forty-year epic” of *The Cantos*, which he also called “the tale of the tribe”, narrative itself is almost entirely dispensed with. Now one of the chief original functions of narrative was mnemonic: to string, so to speak, the beads of wisdom and experience of an oral culture onto a continuous, memorable thread. Although Pound revived several oral devices,¹³ he thought he could do without the mnemonic help of narrative because he realized that his “encyclopedia” was a *book* which offers a form of storage and retrieval that can record, arrange and preserve all knowledge typographically without the narrative prop of memory.

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A familiarity with the laws of oral narrative, then, is helpful in that it throws into relief written narrative, in that it accounts for its peculiarities and may explain its absence in printed books. But a knowledge of oral narrative is also important because it prevents inadequate critical judgements of written narratives that are modelled on oral narrative. This is especially true for the early stages of a written literary

¹¹ Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians: Flaubert, Joyce, Beckett* (Berkeley, 1962), p. 35.

¹² Joseph Russo and Bennett Simon, “Homeric Psychology and the Oral Epic Tradition,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, 4 (Oct./Dec., 1968), pp. 483–98; p. 487.

¹³ See Max Nänny, “Oral Dimensions in Ezra Pound”, *Paideuma*, 6, 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 13–26, and “The Oral Roots of Ezra Pound’s Methods of Quotation and Abbreviation”, *Paideuma*, 3, 8 (Winter 1979), pp. 381–387.

tradition when there are various interactions between oral and written literature, when writers take over narrative material, characteristics of style, and attitudes from preceding or coeval oral literature.

A case in point is G. Wilson Knight's unfavourable criticism of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in an article of 1939.¹⁴ There Knight criticizes Spenser's poem for its lack of structure, especially for its paratactic nature, "there is nothing to stop his poem going on for ever ...". He denounces its baggy, loose effect as well as its fluidity (which he attributes to Spenser's fascination with flowing water!) and he blames it for its "modifying contrasts" that to him do not make up for its want of "dramatic intensity".

But it was C. S. Lewis who realized that Spenser's poem belongs to "an older narrative school."¹⁵ And John Webster demonstrated in 1976 that Spenser's style with its additive sequencing, its staggering epithetic apparatus and its type characterization is not so much defective but reflects "assumptions and expectations of oral poetry."¹⁶

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However, also specific forms of *writing* may place communicative constraints on narrative form and content. An interesting example is provided by the pre-alphabetic scripts in which the literatures of the ancient Near East are encoded.

In his *Origins of Western Literacy* Eric Havelock tries to explain why these literatures have a certain monumentality of composition and simplicity of style, why we gain an overall impression of a rather formalized version of what went on, of what people actually said, did and believed.

Now Havelock attributes this selectivity of form and content typical of those ancient texts to the orthographic ambiguity of the scripts they were written in. According to him, ancient pre-alphabetic scripts center upon religion and myth because these tend to *standardize* the variety of human experience. The reader of such scripts is thus more likely to recognize what the writer is talking about. Thus Havelock writes:

¹⁴ G. Wilson Knight, "The Spenserian Fluidity", *The Burning Oracle* (1939). repr. in *Poets of Action* (London, 1968), pp. 3-16.

¹⁵ Quoted by Martha Craig, "The Secret Wit of Spenser's Language", *Edmund Spenser*, ed. Paul J. Alpers (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 322-339; p. 322.

¹⁶ John Webster, "Oral Forms and Written Craft in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 16, 1 (Winter 1976), pp. 75-93; p. 75.

"It is therefore no accident that the cultures of the Near East which preceded the Greek and are recorded in hieroglyph, cuneiform, or Semitic shorthand, seem on the basis of the record to be peculiarly occupied with such matters [religion and myth]. We normally take it for granted that such preoccupation was an inherent characteristic of these cultures, and it is often put down to the fact that they were at a more 'primitive' stage of development. The reason I am suggesting is rather to be sought in a fact of technology."¹⁷

In short, the ambiguities inherent in syllabic scripts not only imposed a rigorous selectivity of content but also shaped form by standardizing syntax and vocabulary to make narratives readily recognizable and easily decipherable. It was only the alphabet, according to Havelock, which encouraged "the production of unfamiliar statement" and which stimulated "the thinking of novel thought."¹⁸

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One important communicative effect of writing and of its later mechanization, printing, on narrative was tighter plotting.

Walter J. Ong has reminded us that the first closely plotted genre was the Greek drama. As plays were produced from texts, drama, though it was presented orally, was the first genre to be completely controlled by writing. According to Ong, close plotting in prose was only possible when writing and print had been deeply interiorized in the psyche:

Subtly but irresistibly, with print, what one wrote tended more and more to be thought of as lodging eventually in a fixed place. This fact appears to have affected plot 'structure'. All the forces at work are not clear, but it appears certain that until print there were no lengthy prose stories which were organized as tightly in plot as drama had been from the time of the ancient Greeks. Drama had long freed itself from being a story 'told'. First, it was not narrative but action. And second, it had been controlled by writing from ancient Greek times – the first verbal genre to be so controlled (...) Hence drama long preceded lengthy prose narrative in developing tight linear structure, building up to a climax resolved in a dénouement.¹⁹

Now it is interesting to note that E. A. Poe, who recognized that "thought is logicalized by the effort of (written) expression,"²⁰ derived his functional narrative ideal of tighter plotting from drama via Schlegel's dramatic theories.

¹⁷ Eric Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto, 1976), p. 35.

¹⁸ Eric Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Walter J. Ong, "Media Transformation: The Talked Book", *Interfaces of the Word*, pp. 82–91; p. 89.

²⁰ E. A. Poe, "Marginalia: Rhyme", *Poe's Poems and Essays*, ed. Andrew Lang (London: Everyman, 1969), p. 313.

Poe's drive towards tighter plotting was assisted by the vogue of another written mode of communication, namely magazines. Due to a want of international copy-right, magazines and reviews were the main outlets for American writers in Poe's time. Making a virtue of an economic necessity, Poe tailored his narratives to "the close circumscription of space" enforced by what he called "the magazine prison-house."

The briefness of magazine literature not only demanded "the curt, the condensed, the pointed"²¹ but its easy surveyability permitted the total functionalization of the plot towards a "single effect". Combining the ideals of the drama and magazine writing, Poe could therefore demand: "In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not the one pre-established design."²²

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The mode of communication on which most modern narratives have depended is, of course, printing. The intimate connection between the novel and printing has been elaborated by Ian Watt in his *The Rise of the Novel*. "The novel," Watt writes, "is perhaps the only literary genre which is essentially connected with the medium of print."²³ Now as the printed narratives of novels are the chief concern of almost all narrative criticism and theory I may skip them here.

Let me only briefly point to another mode of communication also important to the development of narrative: familiar letter writing. According to Watt, the great popularity of private letter writing in 18th century England was due to several factors: Postal facilities improved greatly after the introduction of a penny post in 1680, soon leading to a postal service whose cheapness, speed and efficiency were unrivalled in Europe. Then there was a marked increase in leisure, in privacy (locks on doors!) and in the literacy of middle class women. The consequent wide diffusion of familiar letters provided the printer Richardson not only with the initial impetus to publish a volume of model letters for young ladies but also to develop "a new species of writing", namely his epochal epistolary technique of narration.²⁴

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²¹ E. A. Poe, "Marginalia: Magazines", *Poe's Poems and Essays*, p. 315.

²² E. A. Poe, "Twice-Told Tales", *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. David Galloway (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 446.

²³ (London, 1957), p. 204.

²⁴ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 196.

One of the first English writers to exploit the conflicting narrative constraints issuing from the various modes of communication was Laurence Sterne.

In his *Tristram Shandy* Sterne upsets the functioning of printed communication not just by playing around with the conventions of the printed book but also by introducing oral-aural devices derived from, first, oral narrative (e. g. the tale told to an audience); second, from the arsenal of rhetoric or public speaking; and, third, from the more free-wheeling art of fashionable conversation: "Writing, when properly managed," Tristram declares, "is but a different name for conversation" (II, ii, 108).

Conversational molds in Sterne's narrative can be seen in his use of trailing afterthought modification rather than anticipatory structures; in a reliance upon non-verbal contexts for part of the meaning; in frequent aposiopesis, i. e. abrupt interruptions of the narrative flow, and, finally, in the sudden shifts of subject matter by similarity or contiguity associations.²⁵

One of Sterne's chief principles of narrative composition, however, namely digression, is not only indebted to the conversational model or the Lockean association of ideas. Digression is also an important narrative device in both the ancient and the African epic. Thus in his article "Parataxis in Homer" J. A. Notopoulos establishes that oral poetry, which is shaped by the mood of the moment, the psychological union of the poet and his audience, "leads to digression."²⁶

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But let me come full circle and return to the narrative art of Charles Dickens. He is probably the writer who exploited the widest variety of both traditional oral-aural modes of communication (among them the fairy-tale and public readings) and new printed media: the newspaper, the periodical, serial publication and even illustrations. Let me just deal with Dickens's public readings and serial publication.

²⁵ See Eugene Hnatko, "Sterne's Conversational Style", *The Winged Skull*, ed. Arthur C. Cash and John M. Stedmond (London, 1971), pp. 229-236; and Max Nänny, "Similarity and Contiguity in *Tristram Shandy*", *English Studies*, 60, 4 (August 1979), pp. 422-435.

²⁶ J. A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism", *TAPA*, 80 (1949), pp. 1-23; p. 16. Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, p. 185, gives a confirmation of internal and external digression in the African epic.

Considering that Dickens rehearsed the readings of his stories (he gave 470 of them) up to two hundred and more times (e.g. "Doctor Marigold"), we realize that in some ways his situation resembled that of an oral singer recreating his tales in performance. For Dickens hardly needed to consult his prompt copies anymore. "I have got to know the Carol so well," he once wrote, "that I can't remember it, and occasionally go dodging about in the wildest manner to pick up lost pieces."²⁷

If we add that Dickens extemporized new jokes and amplified existing ones, it is no wonder that his reading texts never reached a definitive condition thus approaching the fluidity of oral narratives.²⁸ In other words, Dickens's reading texts are not merely abbreviated versions of his printed originals. As Earle Davis has pointed out:

When Dickens came to do the readings from his novels, it should be noted that almost all his reading script was speech. Examination of his personal copy for these readings, corrected from the published text, shows how he noted in the margins a mass of hints as to byplay and gesture, a kind of stage-direction guide for himself. Generally the descriptive parts of his text were acted whenever possible, and often they were crossed out. For instance, beside the copy for his reading of *Oliver Twist* is the word *Action*: 'Fagin raised his right hand, and shook his trembling forefinger in the air.' As Dickens performed it, he *did* what the text said; he did not read the words.²⁹

As has been established for literary fairy-tales that were again subjected to oral retelling, the change back from the written mode of communication to an oral one is bound to be accompanied by orally biased formal "self-corrections."³⁰

Like an oral poet, furthermore, Dickens, who was a born actor, not only performed his tales by help of special voice effects and gestures, but he was intoxicated with actually seeing an audience respond with laughter and tears, even with swoons and fits. "There is nothing in the world

²⁷ Quoted by Philip Collins, *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings* (Oxford, 1975), p. xxxi.

²⁸ See Philip Collins, p. xxxvi: "The Reading texts never reached a definitive condition. So long as they remained in repertoire, they were subject to further abbreviation, reshaping, and extempore improvements, while the mode of performance too remained surprisingly fresh and spontaneous ..."

²⁹ *The Flint and the Flame. The Artistry of Charles Dickens* (London, 1964), p. 51.

³⁰ See Kurt Schier, "Ueberlegungen zum Problem von mündlicher und literarischer Tradition", *Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition: A Symposium* (Odense, 1977), p. 105.

equal to seeing the house rise at you," he once confessed, "one sea of delightful faces, one hurrah of applause."³¹

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Apart from considering his novels as being primarily scripts to be brought to life in oral delivery, Dickens also loosened the writer's traditional control over his text by publishing his novels serially.

Now serial publication as a mode of communication recreated some of the conditions typical of oral narrative. Besides favouring paratactic, episodic composition, serial publication at weekly and more so at monthly intervals demanded recall devices and mnemonic support reminiscent of the oral epic.

In Dickens's serialized novel we not only get anticipatory hints and recollective repetitions but also para-Homeric epithets in the form of tag-line catch phrases. Similarly, his characters are also rather type-cast like the characters of oral narrative ("flat" is E. M. Forster's term); and like them, Dickens's characters tend to be "heavy" or memorable, though in a different way, due to their eccentric names and natures, their high profiles as caricatures.

Besides such oral features as the dualistic contrasting of characters, the polar or parallel organization of plot, we also find standard themes (e.g. the abandoned child). And as in oral narrative, we get in Dickens's work pervasive animation and personification of the inanimate as well as the externalization of inner mental states by means of gestures, postures, food, clothes, and furniture. Externalizations that have misled critics to think that Dickens is not "deep." And, finally, verbal visualization through simile, metaphor and metonymy so important in oral narratives is pushed to an extreme by Dickens.

But what was probably most important to Dickens was again audience response during "performance". For publication in serial parts permitted readers to respond while the story was still in progress. Readers' oral comments and letters as well as the statistics of the fluctuating sales usually had an immediate effect on Dickens's narrative concept of plot and character. Or, in Kathleen Tillotson's words: "Serial publication gave back to story-telling its original context of performance..."³²

Let me now draw the conclusions from my necessarily fragmentary evidence: First, given a wide enough frame of reference, it can be shown

³¹ Quoted by Philip Collins, p. xxi.

³² Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (London, 1956), p. 36.

that the various modes of communication entail constraints (and possibilities) that are not just accidental but essential to the form and even content of narrative for, as Eugene Vance writes, "any narrative is shaped at least in part by the process of its dissemination."³³ Second, as we move towards the present the conscious or unconscious interplay between the different media constraints or possibilities becomes more and more complex, sometimes leading to the recreation of old communicative conditions by new means (as, for instance, with Dickens). And last, a knowledge of the specific constraints and possibilities inherent in the different modes of communication are not only helpful but sometimes basic for a proper understanding of narrative.

³³ "Roland and the Poetics of Memory", p. 400.