

WALTER J. ONG "A DIALECTIC OF AURAL AND OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVES" (1958)

Ong, Walter J. "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives." Twentieth Century Literary Criticism. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1972. 498-508.

Here, Ong distances himself from the widespread view associated with the New Critics, who were dominant in the 1940's and 1950's, that the critic should completely ignore the author and focus exclusively on the text itself. To ignore this advice was to commit what they termed the 'intentional fallacy.' Identifying particular theorists and critics such as Brooks, Wimsatt, Richards, Wellek, Warren, and Eliot, Ong begins by stressing that there has been a tendency in those quarters to "draw an analogy between a poem and an object" (498). Such a view of literature reflects a "state of mind fixed on a world of spaces and surfaces" (499) and a "tactile and visualist bias" (499). Such theorists, "preoccupied with objects, structures, skeletons, and stratified systems" (499), have relied too heavily on "spatial analogies" (499). This has had the effect of ignoring the "radically acoustic quality of the dialogue between man and man in which all verbal expression has its being" (498):

To consider the work of literature in its primary oral and aural existence, we must enter more profoundly into this world of sound as such, the I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provides, persons commune with persons, reaching one another's interiors in a way in which one can never reach the interior of an 'object.' Here, instead of reducing words to objects, . . . we take them simply as what they are even more basically, as utterances, that is to say, as cries. All verbalisation, including all literature, is radically a cry, a sound emitted from the interior of a person. . . . The cry which strikes our ear, even the animal cry, is consequently a sign of an interior condition, indeed of that special interior focus of pitch of being which we call life, an invasion of all the atmosphere which surrounds a being by that being's interior state, and in the case of man, it is an invasion of his own interior self-consciousness. (499-500)

The utterance is a cry emanating from within and, as such, constitutes a strangely magnetic action, which involves not so much one's going out to others as one's drawing other interiors into the ambit of one's being. The voice . . . 'captivates' others' attention, their very selves, 'involving' them . . . by pulling them into his own interior and forcing them to share the state which exists there. (500)

The cry "advertises to all that is outside and around it that this *interior* is here, and . . . manifesting itself" (500).

Ong stresses that "all verbal expression" (500) remains "forever something mysterious" (500):

Like the self or person, the word refuses to submit completely to any of those norms of clarity or explicitness (which means 'unfoldedness') such as derive through considering knowledge and communication by analogy with sight. It refuses to be completely exposed (as a surface) or explicated (unfolded) or explained (laid out flat) or defined (marked by boundary lines) or to be entirely clear (separated from its ground or background) and distinct (pricked out). (501)

It is not enough in this regard to speak of a work as having "depth" (501) for to speak of depth is ultimately to think in terms of surfaces (which are opposed to 'depths'). Interiority "does not have surface at all, and can never have" (501).

Language must always have a “double reference . . . to person and to object” (501), that is, to objects in the real world and to the thoughts and feelings of the person which uses them. However, language is the “medium wherein persons discover and renew their discovery that they are persons, that is, discover and renew their own proper interiority and selves” (501). Persons who never learn to talk remain, Ong argues, to some degree, “imbeciles, unable to enter fully into themselves” (501). Of course, the use of language implies both a speaker and a hearer as a result of which the “pitch of utterance . . . bears toward the interior of the speaker – and by the same token towards the interior of the hearer, who repeats in his own interior the words of the speaker and thereby understands them” (501).

Given that literature “exists within the medium of words themselves and does not seek escape from this medium” (501), it “of all the forms of language has in a sense most interiority” (501). In other words, it is the use of language and the artistic medium most apt to reveal the personality of the writer. Criticism, accordingly, must be predicated on the fact that “literature (and art) exist in a particular relationship to the interior of man” (501). It must to some degree, therefore, be about “explanation” (502) and “elucidation” (502): its “ultimate object may be to introduce the reader more full into the mystery which is the poem, but its technique will be to some extent to ‘clear up’ certain things” (502). Criticism should not seek to “reduce the work of literature – most typically the poem – to some sort of object” (502). This is because literary works “consist in words” (501) which “retain in themselves ineluctably something of the interiority of their birth within that interior which is a person” (502). We should bear in mind, Ong argues, that utterances are not so much “projections of interiority” (501). Rather, we are more accurate if we keep our metaphors closer to the world of sound and think of speech and of works of literature as ‘amplifications’ or, better, as intensifications of an interior. All words projected from a speaker remain . . . somehow interior to him, being an invitation to another person, another interior, to share the speaker’s interior, an invitation to enter into, not to regard from the outside. (503)

In so far, Ong argues, that all works are “in some measure utterances, expressions emanating from the human psyche, they, too, partake of this interiority” (503). They serve to “join the otherwise unknown artist and observer – uniting those into whom the word enters, or who enter into it” (503).

Criticism must go beyond the preoccupation with the objective form of the work of literature “by giving more explicit attention to the oral-aural commitments of art, and particularly of literature” (504). We must understand literature in relation to the “existential implications of dialogue – that is, of all expression viewed for what it basically is, an exchange between an ‘I’ and a ‘thou’” (504). There are a number of changes attendant upon this revised view of literature and the function of the critic. Firstly, we will have to rethink the “‘boundaries’ of a literary work” (505). We can no longer focus on the “interior organisation of the work” (505) to the exclusion of all else. Rather, each literary work is a “moment in an age-old conversation in which what goes on within the artist’s psyche and registers in his work” (505) is merely a “moment in an age-old exchange of talk” (505). Thinking of a given work as a “moment in a dialogue engenders an awareness of its ‘open’ or unbounded historical potential, and of its unlikeness to a discrete ‘object’” (505). A single work is “discrete somewhat in the abstract way in which a moment in a dialogue is discrete” (505): it is a “unit for pause and meditation. It communicates a unique something which cannot be laid hold of outside the poem. But, . . . this something does not stand entirely by itself” (505).

The concept of literary genre must also, secondly, be rethought, Ong argues. Just

as the literary work resists as an 'object' thought of as clearly and distinctly outlined in space, so it resists complete framing in terms of types and genres" (505). Attempts to define works generically amount to an attempt to "define, to delimit, to mark off, and in this way conceal a visualist approach to knowledge, feeling, and communication" (505). This is because works are "not objects but moments in a dialogue" (505). In the diverse works of a single author, there is a "certain unity greater than that found in the genres to which the various works belong. The basis for this unity is that they are all the utterances, the word, of one man" (505).

Thirdly, the very relationship between literature and criticism must be rethought, Ong argues:

since it is not simply an object, but also something that someone (a historical person, speaking in a certain place at a certain historical time and after certain historical literary events) utters after and because others have uttered something else, and since the work of the critics is also something that someone utters after and because others have uttered something else (this something else being both the work of art and its antecedents, as well as other criticism), the lines of criticism and literature are necessarily interwoven, each belonging to a certain moment in the totality of activity emanating from human life in history. Seen this way, literature is perhaps somewhat less the poor relation of literature than it is sometimes made out to be. It is part of the total dialogue in which all literature exists. (506)

When one thinks of a literary work as an object, the critic uses words to "process, understand, and assimilate spatial conceptions" (506). But to do so removes the work from the "flow of conversation and understanding in which human life moves" (506). It is the critic's task to return the work to "this flow, . . . that is to say, to what concrete, existent persons are actually saying and thinking" (506).

However, Ong warns that it would be a mistake to assume that what the critic's goal in this regard is merely to "elucidate,' to 'explicate,' to 'clarify' the work of art" (506). This is because to seek to elucidate or explicate the words of a literary work is in effect to desire to move it

out of the world of resonance and voice into space. For in so far as one aims to 'elucidate,' to 'explicate,' to 'clarify,' one aims to process one's knowledge through considering it by analogy with a space-light world of vision, not a world of sound. Concepts of this sort – elucidate, explicate, clarify – are all based on this visualist analogy. (507)

This is why Ong compares the critic to someone trapped between Scylla and Charybdis: the critic is caught in the "dialectic of object and word in which the work of art has its being" (507). When he considers the work as an object, one "attempts in some sort to verbalise it" (507), to reduce it to words. When one takes it as a word, one attempts to "objectify it, to exploit its likeness to 'things'" (507). Most often, the critic does a little of both. The critic, in other words, "can encode the object in words or decode the word into a quasi object" (507).

Fourthly, Ong argues (this point is related to his first point earlier) that the view of literature which he proposes will change our understanding of literary history. World views which "consider all human knowledge, wittingly or unwittingly, by analogy with sight-knowledge (abetted more or less by tactile perception of spatial relations) to the exclusion of sound-knowledge, have no place for history, are helpless to deal with evolution, cosmic, organic, or intellectual" (507). No way of "philosophising about history has arisen to compete with that which sees the movements of history as analogous to those of dialogue-to what happens when one inviolable interiority or human person sets about

communicating with another" (508). Ong contends that if literary history is to be more than a sheer enumeration of befores and afters, more than . . . a surface treatment proceeding by likening works of art to discrete objects apprehended by sight rather than . . . to persons themselves (for voice is an intensification of person), it will have to avail itself of this notion of dialogue more explicitly. (508)

For literature

consists in an echo and amplification of snatches of conversation salvaged from all over this world's history – snatches . . . of what registered in the interiors of men and women since these interiors began that communication with one other within which we still live our conscious lives. (508)