

# Paradoxes of Orality and Literacy: The Curious Case of the Renaissance Dialogue

Jean-François Vallée

Collège de Maisonneuve / Université de Montréal

(Centre de recherche en intermédialité)

jfvallee@cmaisonneuve.qc.ca

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This paper examines the complex orality-literacy issues related to the immense popularity of the written dialogue during the European Renaissance. Three hypotheses purport to explain the attractiveness of this form in the wake of Humanism and the rise of print culture: (1) dialogues could point to a form of “residual orality” left over from the medieval oral-aural era; (2) the genre could be a transitional form facilitating the historical shift from an aural to a visual culture; (3) dialogue’s popularity could be seen as a rhetorical-oral reaction to the abstract logic of earlier scholasticism. However, the incompleteness of these hypotheses warrants the proposal of a fourth—more encompassing and “media ecological”—hypothesis based on what I propose to call the “dialogocentric” perspective of humanist writing.

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The simulation of oral interaction through writing that is the basis of the dialogue genre presents many interesting conceptual challenges to the orality-literacy paradigm. Apparently present from the very beginning in most early scribal cultures, this hybrid form of writing seems to reappear and become prevalent especially in transitional periods of civilizations, when epistemological, political, social, or religious structures are being questioned, whether it be in Egypt, Greece, Rome, the European Renaissance, the 18th century (Hirzel, 1895; Guellouz, 1992), or, in a more philosophical fashion, the 20th century. In the first half of the 20th century, one finds first and foremost dialogic philosophy or theory (e.g., in the works of Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail Bakhtin, etc.), while the genre of dialogue itself seems to have attracted theoretical and practical interest only at the very end of the century. This process reverses the historical progression of the Renaissance, where theories of dialogue appeared only at the very end of the era, more than two centuries after the practice of dialogue was introduced by early Humanists. (On late Renaissance theories of dialogue, see Snyder, 1989.)

It is apparently during the European Renaissance, however, in the wake of humanism and throughout the rise of print culture in the 16th century, that the written dialogue genre seems to have experienced its most prolific outburst. The dialogue was unquestionably one of, if not the most ubiquitous form of writing of this period: countless authors, working in many different fields of knowledge and cultural areas, resorted to the rhetorical and fictional stratagem of representing various types of conversations through the written word. Humanists, especially, wrote innumerable dialogues, imitating, more or less faithfully—and sometimes conflating—ancient dialogic models, such as those of Plato, Cicero, and Lucian. Moreover, dialogue could

certainly not be said to be a minor genre, since many of the most renowned authors of the Renaissance made prolific use of this polyvocal writing strategy: Petrarch, Bruni, Valla, Alberti, Ficino, Machiavelli, Erasmus, More, Vives, Castiglione, Aretino, Spenser, Bruno, Galileo, Cervantés, and many others, all engaged in the composition of such texts. Dialogues even framed narrative genres (such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*) and completely permeated humanist novels (such as Rabelais's works, especially the *Tiers Livre*), as Pascale Mounier has shown recently (2007). Hence, it is not surprising that Suzanne Guellouz (1992), in her general survey of the dialogue through the ages, concludes that the Renaissance is the period in which dialogue, "as a genre, universally triumphed" (my translation, p. 166).

The same author, however, is puzzled by the paradoxical fact that it is precisely "after the invention of print, just as writing was being consecrated as a widespread form of communication, that the very same people who were at the source of these writings would be so fascinated by orality" (my translation, p. 192).

Using Ong and McLuhan, who oddly enough never seemed to have discussed this paradoxical genre, and with various references to the secondary literature on Renaissance dialogue, I will attempt to understand the fascination for written orality that characterized the members of this Renaissance version of the "literate sect" that constituted humanism according to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1999).

I will start by briefly examining three different—but not necessarily mutually exclusive—hypotheses about the possible source of the pervasiveness of these written and "printed voices" (Heitsch & Vallée, 2004) in the European Renaissance, before suggesting a fourth perspective, that might also be significant for our own current predicament.

### **The Residual-Remedial Perspective: Humanists as Reactionaries**

This first hypothesis is based on the effects of the past. According to this perspective, Renaissance humanist authors could be seen simply as the victims—willing or unwilling—of the still prevalent orality of the times. This view is espoused, for example, by Burke (1989), referring here to Ong's renowned article on Tudor prose:

It is perhaps a bit less facile to explain the flourishing of the dialogue during the Renaissance by the first impact of printing on a culture which was still in many ways oral even at the level of the élites. Walter Ong [1965] has remarked on the importance of what he calls "oral residue" in Tudor prose, and his argument fits the dialogue particularly well. (p. 7)

Hence, the immense popularity of the dialogue in the Renaissance could be seen as a symptom of the "residual orality" left over from the still omnipresent oral-aural perspective before the true domination of print culture and the impending "decay of dialogue" (Ong, 1958). This perspective emphasizes the continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and applies very well to certain dialogues (partic-

ularly satirical dialogues that imitate colloquial conversation), but it does little to explain the sudden rise in popularity of the dialogue genre with the rise of Humanism in the Trecento and the obvious differences between most of these new classically inspired dialogues and the previous medieval disputations, debates, or allegories. This hypothesis tends to brand Humanists as “oralist reactionaries” and does not account for the specificity—and novelty—of the Renaissance guise of dialogue.

### **The Transitional-Cooperative Perspective: Humanists as Collaborationists**

**A**nother, apparently more fruitful perspective, would be to see humanist authors of dialogues less as reactionaries than as facilitators in the transition that led from the medieval scribal culture, still highly influenced by the oral/aural perspective, and the rising visual-typographic era.

This is what Kenneth Wilson (1985)—hesitantly—proposes in his book on Tudor dialogue:

The publication of larger numbers of all kinds of dialogue was made possible by the invention of movable type. After printing, the method of instruction was no longer predominantly oral. . . . Some of the longer new dialogues must have been intended to be read silently, not aloud, and independent silent reading of dialogues must increasingly have supplemented the vocal work of the classroom. Whether printed dialogues played a part in the historical transformation . . . from an aural to a visual culture, I leave the reader to decide. (p. 53)

This transitional perspective might also be what McLuhan is suggesting in his discussion of More’s *Utopia* in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962):

St. Thomas More offers a plan for a bridge over the turbulent river of scholastic philosophy. . . . As we stand on the frontiers between the manuscript and the typographical worlds, it is indispensable that a good deal of comparison and contrast of the traits of these two cultures be done here. . . . Writing in 1516, More is aware that the medieval scholastic dialogue, oral and conversational, is quite unsuited to the new problems of large centralist states. A new kind of processing of problems, one thing at a time, “nothing out of due order and fashion,” must succeed to the older dialogue. For the scholastic method was a simultaneous mosaic, a dealing with many aspects and levels of meaning in crisp simultaneity. This method will no longer serve in the new lineal era. (p. 129)

Finally, Jacqueline Ferreras, in her monumental study of Spanish Renaissance dialogue (1985), also insists on this intermediary situation of the authors of dialogues and views it as a likely explanation for the popularity of the genre:

It is obvious that through their use of the book these authors are touched earlier than others by the effects of print culture. In a society that is still dominantly aural-tactile, they constitute a new minority with a visual bias, at the forefront of what will become, much later, the attitude of the whole of society. They are on the cusp of two

modes of apprehending the world, thus it is not by chance that they *write conversations*. ([my translation], pp. 12-13)

This transitional perspective is highly seductive: it fits perfectly with the historical perspective that sees the Renaissance itself as a transitional era between the Medieval and Modern world, and Humanists as mediators in this process. There is, however, a slight problem regarding the timing of the emergence of dialogue: indeed, the rise of the genre as a preeminent form of written expression—together with other very communicative written forms such as the familiar letter and the declamation—comes at least a century before the invention of print technology in Europe. For example, Petrarch's *Secretum*, generally considered to be the first truly humanist dialogue, was written sometime between 1347 and 1353, and many other dialogues by Quattrocento Humanists, such as those of Bruni, Salutati, Bracciolini, Valla, or Alberti, were written in the decades prior to the development of European movable type printing in the mid 15th century. Bruni's *Dialogus I* was written in 1401. Poggio Bracciolini published his first dialogue (*De avaritia*) in manuscript form in 1428. Valla composed his *De vero falsoque bono* between 1431 and 1441, his famous *De libero arbitrio* in 1439 and his *De professione religiosorum* in 1442. Alberti had written dialogues in Latin—*Pontifex* (1437), the first *Intercoenales* (between 1430 and 1440) and his *Momus* (1443)—and in Italian—*Libri della Famiglia* (1433-1434, 1437), *Theogonius* (1438-1441) and *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri* (1441 and 1442)—before the advent of print in Italy. (For more information on Quattrocento Humanist writers of dialogue, see Marsh, 1980). How, then, could the humanist authors of dialogues be seen as “collaborationists”—again willing or unwilling—facilitating the transition to the new print culture?

### **The Resistance-Innovative Perspective: Humanists as Revolutionaries**

The third hypothesis is based neither on the medieval residual past nor the transitional Renaissance present, but on the more future-oriented and “novel” nature of humanist writing practices. This perspective espouses the traditional view of Renaissance Humanism as a reaction or even revolt against medieval scholastic philosophy, and in so doing underscores the discontinuity between medieval and Renaissance cultures.

From this standpoint, it is not the invention of print that should be held responsible for the immense popularity of these written conversations, but rather the rebirth of classical rhetoric within the milieu of the *umanisti* advocating the *studia humanitatis* against the dry speculations of university dialectic and their seemingly sterile disputations. (For a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Humanist and Scholastic logic and rhetoric, see Rummel, 1995). From the point of view—or “point of voice”—of the orality-literacy paradigm, this rebirth of classical rhetoric brings about a rhetorical revaluation of the oral in the written, as is well explained by Cox (1992) in her monograph on Italian dialogue of the 16th century:

It is true, also, that the humanist strand in this culture—the strand which produced the dialogue—represented a turning away from the markedly written forms of scholastic argumentation to rhetorical models which were felt to reflect more closely the rhythms of speech. . . . The forms of argument most characteristic of the humanist dialogue are those rhetorical techniques, like *exemplum* and analogy, which most clearly betray their roots in oral culture. (pp. 102-103)

In a lecture on “The Ancient Roots of Humanist Rhetoric” (n.d.), as in many other writings, Ong also notes this reevaluation of the oral-aural by Humanists through the rise of what he terms an “omnivorous rhetoric”:

This omnivorousness of rhetoric continues and even grows during the Renaissance, when letter-writing manuals prescribe that letters themselves (despite their obvious non-oral character) be cast in the form of orations, with an exordium, *narratio* or assertion to be proved, proof of the point, refutation of adversaries, and peroration. Scholarly treatises . . . are commonly organized as orations, when they are not organized as outright disputations or dialogues. (p. 8)

According to this hypothesis, humanist dialogue could be seen as a rhetorical, and partly oral, reaction to the more textual dialectic of earlier scholasticism: Humanists would accordingly be seen as “neo-oral revolutionaries.”

But, when examined more closely, this change of emphasis in the *trivium* in the Renaissance from dialectic to rhetoric, also noted by McLuhan in his dissertation on Nashe (1943/2006), seems quite paradoxical given that Humanists were in fact much more ensconced in literate culture than their medieval predecessors. As Cox (1992) has noted: “The culture within which the Renaissance dialogue developed was, of course, a highly literate one and its products cannot be likened to those of primarily oral societies” (p. 102).

Indeed, Humanists were, first and foremost, interested in textual scholarship—writing, translating, correcting, commenting, editing—while the medieval university—based on verbal teaching, *disputationes*, *quaestiones*, etc.—was comparatively more orally biased. This seems obvious when one looks at Renaissance dialogues, which most often depict conversations between relatively or even highly literate speakers, such as is the case in More’s *Utopia* or Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* (to give only two of the most famous examples). Of course, as we all know, rhetoric, however partial it may be towards public oral speaking, could only have been the product of written, and especially alphabetic, civilizations.

This is where the situation becomes tricky from the orality-literacy standpoint. As Ong (n.d.) noted about these issues in the Renaissance: “At this point, the lines of connection between the spoken and the written and printed word become almost unutterably confused, but also very interestingly so” (p. 1).

This is also why a fourth hypothesis, that to a certain extent incorporates aspects of the three previous ones while adding a “media ecological” perspective, should be submitted here if one is to gain a deeper understanding of the huge popularity of the dialogue genre in the Renaissance.

### **The Dialogocentric-Interactive Perspective: Humanists as Media Ecologists?**

This new perspective presupposes that Humanists were—consciously or unconsciously—aware of the shifting media environment and trying to make the most of it. Indeed, from this angle, one could infer, for instance, that it is precisely *because* Humanists were increasingly entrenched in a literate culture—a state of affairs that would only get “worse” with the advent and rapid extension of print technology throughout the 16th century—that they felt this need to reevaluate various aspects of oral communication through their imitation, in some cases, of primary orality; through their rhetorical use, in other cases, of the “neo-orality” of classical *eloquentia* (inspired especially by Cicero’s figure of the *doctus orator*, as McLuhan showed in his 1943 dissertation); and through their systematic recourse to very “communicative” forms of writing such as dialogues or familiar letters. Following the Classical tradition and Libanius’ famous definition, letters were considered by Renaissance Humanists as “dialogues *in absentia*”: “*Libanius sophista graecus epistolam finit hoc modo Epistola est absentis ad absente[m] colloquiu[m]*” (Erasmus, as cited in Jardine, 1993, p. 163). Cox also underscores the similarities between dialogues and letters: “by duplicating its primary communication with a fictional double, the dialogue has the effect of calling attention to the act of communication itself. . . . Of the major argumentational genres, only the letter—a form whose affinities with the dialogue were celebrated in the Cinquecento—insists to the same extent on the reality of its addressee” (1992, p. 6)

Gérard Defaux (1987), for one, has suggested that the polyvocal rhetorical writing strategies of the Humanists might have been a way of alleviating the fear that the sudden increase in textual production—which was already in progress, as is noted by Ong (1972), decades before the advent of printing<sup>1</sup>—would somehow “dehumanize” speech by dissociating it from the human subject. It is for this reason, continues Defaux, that the Humanist author made use of a series of writing and rhetorical practices and techniques, such as dialogue, to persuade himself, and his reader, that true “presence” is not the exclusive territory of the spoken word, but that it can also be instilled in writing, which, as Montaigne (1979) confirms even at the very end of the Renaissance, could be seen simply as a way of “speaking to the paper just as we speak to somebody we meet.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In his lecture “The End of the Age of Literacy”, Ong (1972) describes printing as the “culmination” of a process that started in the Middle Ages: “the oral-aural approach maintained a great deal of strength, in the medieval universities for example. . . . But despite this persistent stress on the oral and aural, the voice and the ear, medieval European culture was more devoted to manuscripts than any earlier cultures had been. Medieval man . . . used texts more assiduously than earlier man ever had. . . . It was the Middle Ages which at their culmination developed the art of printing. For printing is an effective way of producing in great quantity what a manuscript culture wants, something to read” (pp. 9-10)

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am translating and paraphrasing the following passage in Defaux (1987): “Ces nouvelles techniques de reproduction et de duplication de l’écrit ont dû aussi inévitablement être considérées avec

I would add the caveat however that this (positive) logocentrism that Defaux identifies in all Humanist writing could be more accurately described as *dialogocentrism*, since Renaissance humanist writing is almost always based on a plural *ethos* and various forms of address within and outside the boundaries of the text. The central nature of dialogocentrism in Renaissance Humanism is plainly obvious, to give only one telling and renowned example, in Erasmus's Latin retranslation of John's *In principio erat Verbum* of the Vulgate, by *In principio erat sermo*: "In the beginning was . . ." not the "Word" but "speech," "discourse"—that is, "dialogue." (For a precise description of the many grammatical and theological implications of this translation by Erasmus's revised edition of the *New Testament* in 1519, see O'Rourke Boyle, 2004. The word *sermo* was also used—by Cicero for one—to refer to the written dialogue genre.)

What is more, in some cases, as I have argued regarding More's *Utopia* (Vallée, 2004), it seems that Humanists—notably through their use of dialogues and the "dialogues *in absentia*" of familiar letters—were attempting to go beyond the written or printed character of the book. Indeed, the best of them, such as More and Erasmus, tried to create the "impression" that the printed book was truly an open form of communication through which the author could enter into dialogue with his reader according, most often, to the model of "a familiar dialogue amongst literate friends." Thus, the simulation of orality within the written dialogue, through the conversations of the fictional speakers, aspired to recreate the same interaction at the level of the author and the reader. As Cox (1992) writes, "the 'openness' of the open dialogue depends in an intangible but crucial fashion on its fiction of orality . . . The open dialogue rests on a fragile pact between author and reader, held together by mutual fictions" (p. 107).

Furthermore, I would argue that, for many Humanists, this fiction of true dialogic interaction through writing was not as fictional as one might think today. For the most ambitious authors, the "metaphor" of reading as a form of dialogue was more than metaphorical, it was openly "metamorphical." (See Cusson, 1999, on the semi-otic and hermeneutical issues involved in the metaphor of reading seen as a dialogue in Gadamer and Bakhtin.) Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere (Vallée, 2004), works such as More's *Utopia* endeavored—through their use of dialogue, dialogues within dialogues, familiar letters, and *marginalia*, etc.—to grant the printed book a multi-level, rhetorically interactive, and quasi-utopian dialogic energy and structure that purported to literally—and literarily—*transform* the reader morally.

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une certaine méfiance [...]. Rien ne risquait en effet davantage qu'elles de déshumaniser la parole, de la dissocier définitivement du sujet, de la rejeter à tout jamais dans l'extériorité la plus dangereuse et la plus aliénante. Et c'est sans doute pour parer à ce danger [...] que l'Humaniste développe alors toute une problématique de l'écrit, met en place une série de pratiques et de discours visant tous à le persuader, et à nous persuader, que la Présence n'est pas le seul privilège de la parole parlée, qu'elle peut aussi bien être celui de la parole écrite et qu'après tout écrire n'est rien d'autre que de « parler au papier » comme on parle « au premier que l'on rencontre » (pp. 51-52).

As we know, and as Ong has shown most notably in his work on Ramus, this radically dialogic conception of the book—coalescing the power of the oral and the written words—was condemned to give way to the more visually biased culture and spatialization of the Word in the typographic world that would gradually establish itself in Western culture.

Of course, dialogues were still published until at least the 19th century, with a noteworthy resurgence in the 18th, but as Cox (1992) has demonstrated for the Italian tradition (and as I could confirm *a propos* the French tradition), the “decline” of the true dialogocentric perspective of dialogues—or, at least, its displacement or “inward-turn” (Rigolot, 2004) in other genres such as the essay or the novel—had already started at the end of the 16th century, when dialogues began to be adorned with visual or spatial traits, such as diagrams, subtitles, and indexes or, in a sudden reversal, when written conversations became “literate” models for oral conversations, as was the case in the French 17th-century Salon and courtly cultures.

### Postscript on the Significance of Scriptural Dialogue Today

**N**ow that we are coming out of the “Gutenberg Parenthesis,” as Pettitt (2007) has termed it, one cannot help but wonder if our so-called “post-humanist” civilization could learn something from these Renaissance Humanists, who tried to straddle and preserve many aspects of oral, scribal, and print media through the use of transitional and hybrid forms such as the written dialogue. Ong warned us that though “[t]he manuscript or chirographic age and the succeeding print or typographic age have been superseded by a new age, the age of electronic communication. . . . [Y]et we must be literate as never before” (1972, p. 19).

In this respect, it seems important to remain in dialogue with the Renaissance Humanists, just as they themselves remained in dialogue with the Ancients. The plural and hybrid, at once rhetorical and ethical mindset of the best of Renaissance dialogues could perhaps provide a model of multimedia integration and interaction for our own transitional and hybrid media environment. In other words, on the closing side of the Gutenberg parenthesis, as in a mirror image of the Humanists, it might become crucially important to maintain such a dialogue, beyond the sometimes overly enthusiastic appraisals of the secondary orality or secondary literacy of new media, with some of the more positive aspects of traditional scribal and print literacy.

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