

The Complexity of Oral Tradition

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In challenging a remark I had once made while presenting a paper at a professional meeting, a member of the audience said that he could demonstrate that there was no oral tradition in sixteenth-century Spain. To me this meant that the speaker had proof that people living on the Iberian Peninsula at that time never spoke to one another. Obviously, to him, “oral tradition” meant something else entirely. The very concept, the comprehension of such a mode of life, is alien to literates; and despite the writing done on the subject in recent decades by Walter Ong, Albert Lord, Ruth Finnegan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jack Goody (to name only a few), “Oral Tradition” is not a concept widely understood by professional educators, let alone agreed upon. This essay will outline some of the major research and thinking done on this subject to date, to provide a context for uni-disciplinary work now done. It will not announce a truth; it will describe what the author has in mind when speaking of this mode.

Although many Romantics were, for their own reasons, enthralled with the idea of savage nobility and its lifeworld, a world in which the complicating (and corrupting) products of technology had not yet been imposed, that simple (oral) society has not been easy to identify. In his *The Singer of Tales* (1960:137), Albert Lord laments the rise of literacy in the Yugoslavia where he and Milman Parry did so much of their fieldwork with the remark that printing had introduced the notion of the “fixed” text and that there were now very few singers “who have not been infected by this disease.” Their performances are reproductions rather than creations, Lord continues, and “this means death to oral tradition . . .” (*ibid.*). Anthropologists and folklorists would not agree, since much of their research on the subject indicates that rarely is a

society entirely oral (non-literate or pre-literate) or literate. The truth, as is usually the case with truth, is mixed.

Ruth Finnegan reminds us that some degree of literacy has been a feature of culture nearly all over the world for thousands of years (1977:23). In searching for a model culture in which to demonstrate the consequences of literacy, Jack Goody and Ian Watt (Goody 1968:27-68) had to reject nearly every society of their acquaintance, certainly those of the "Third World," before deciding on classical Greece. They found that initially they had to "reject any dichotomy based upon the assumption of radical differences between the mental attributes of literate and non-literate peoples" (44). Finnegan's basic point, and mine, is that oral and literate societies exist in a continuity, not a dichotomy, as do their lyrics and narratives. The two kinds of society, if one can even speak of "kinds," are not purely separate:

They shade into each other both in the present and over many centuries of historical development, and there are innumerable cases of poetry which has both "oral" and "written" elements. The idea of pure and uncontaminated "oral culture" as the primary reference point for the discussion of oral poetry is a myth (Finnegan 1977:24).

She sagely warns that nearly all of the (oral) Third World cultures have been exposed, in varying degrees, to the influence of literacy (1977:23); the line between oral and written literature, if there ever was one, is now hopelessly blurred. Linguists, measuring the amount of detail, direct quotation, sound and word repetition, syntactic parallelism, and so forth, conclude that written imaginative literature uses aspects of spoken language (e.g., Tannen 1982:18) and may be qualitatively indistinguishable. Finnegan was writing to argue with the Parry-Lord enthusiasts, but the point must not be disregarded out of that context. Purely oral folk probably cannot be identified and studied today, but certain conclusions about orality are nevertheless possible, and some descriptions of oral literature can be made.

Philosophers such as Father Ong have tried to re-create what the world of the non-literate must be like and though his work is somewhat speculative, his insights are extremely valuable. Our difficulty is suggested, for instance, by the necessity of using the locution "oral literature." "Literature" means that which is

written; the addition of “oral” makes the compound an oxymoron. The whole matter of orality is intricate anyway—do we mean orally composed, orally transmitted, or orally performed?—and “oral literature” denies the priority of orality as a communication mode. Just as the early typewriters were “writing machines” and the first automobiles were “horseless carriages,” we have created the back-formation, “oral literature.” The difference between “horseless carriages” and “oral literature” is that the horse did “come” first, while writing did not precede oral communication. The term “illiterate,” only slightly more so than “pre-literate,” gives a primacy and a normality to “literate”; to be illiterate is to lack something. Literacy has become so much the norm that we no longer think of “oral tradition” as redundant, though “tradition” originally meant transmission by word of mouth or by custom. Instead of the paradox “oral literature,” I have coined “Oralature,” employing both “oral” and a suffix implying language which is ordered for an aesthetic purpose. This neologism, for whatever reason, has not taken hold.

Goody and Watt note that even in the most literate cultures “the transmission of values and attitudes in face-to-face contact” (1968:58-59) is oral. They find this desirable in some instances, citing the conservative influence of primary groups whose oral communication is more realistic in its attitudes than are commercial media, particularly television. It has long been appreciated that in literate cultures the most important aspects of life are communicated orally.

Melville Jacobs (1971:212) tells us that in the societies he analyzed everyone participated in the tribe’s “literary” heritage, unlike the situation in ours. Myths retold within the community contained many apostrophic pontifications which established the truth and strength of the community’s convictions. The goals of some folklorists in their study of oralatures is not distantly removed from the aims of some literary critics; oralature is the expression of a people—to some extent this is also true of the written art which is familiar to us—and not that of a few geniuses (121).

All of the verbal elements in culture—literate and non-literate, but especially the latter—are transmitted by a long chain of interlocking face-to-face conversations between members of the group. All beliefs and values are related orally, face-to-face, and are held in human memory. Writing, and other components

of a material tradition, are ideal for preserving data, but do not lend themselves so cogently to the assertion of a culture's values. Oral traditions are both more specific and less ambiguous communication, because the speaker reinforces his or her specificity of meaning with gesture, expression, intonation, and so on, and various self-correcting mechanisms of which fixed print is incapable. Conrad's narrator in *Under Western Eyes* comments that "words, as is well-known, are the great foes of reality" (1963:1). Nevertheless we can speak of print's stability; the fixity of print does give the relative stability of meaning to words (or tries to), while oral folk ratify the meaning of each word "in a succession of concrete situations" (Goody 1968:29). The vocabulary of non-literates is small, commonly around five thousand words, as opposed to about seven or eight times that for a college-educated Western European or American; but in oral society there is much less disagreement about denotation and connotative usages. Words acquire and retain their meanings from their existential setting (Ong 1982:47).

While literature has made many aspects of culture available to a very great proportion of society's members, the impersonality of print has also made culture easy to avoid. Print removes a portion of learning from that immediate chain of personal confrontations. In an oral culture the aged are the repositories of a culture's wisdom; the elderly can be discounted somewhat in modern technological society, not so much because of rapid changes in successive waves of the "future," but because wisdom is available in books. Plato had argued that the wisdom of writing was superficial; no give and take of cross-examination and responses was possible. If the reader questions a written proposition, there can be no response, no defense. A book can be put aside; it may never be opened at all. Discussion, argument, and oral deliberation are not easily side-stepped in face-to-face situations. Some Indian philosophers (see Goody 1968:12-13) were suspicious of book knowledge (it is not operative and fruitful), and knowledge that was not acquired from teachers was suspect. Be that as it may, the impact of writing (and later, print) has been incalculable. It universalized the Italian Renaissance, helped to implement the Reformation, made capitalism possible (Eisenstein 1979). Print established the grammarian's canon of correctness.

Objectifying words in print, and especially in dictionaries, makes them and their meanings vulnerable to intensive and

prolonged scrutiny. They—words—are impossible to fix. Durrell (1961:65) has complained about “as unstable” a medium as words. But this is no more than Chaucer had done; language changes in time, across distance, shifting as does mood. Dictionaries eventually become obsolete, yet during the era of their viability individual thought is fostered by them. The solitary, introspective reader is the polar opposite of the gregarious participant in an oral culture; yet both are, in these extreme images, heuristically symbolic. Nevertheless there is much measurable truth in this polar abstraction; the conservatism inherent in oral cultures militates against the individuation that writing and private reading foster. The ties in traditional societies tend to be between persons; in literate cultures the ties are complicated by abstract notions of rules, “by a more complicated set of complementary relationships between individuals in a variety of roles” (Goody and Watt 1968:62).

While contrasting these polarities, it is well to remember, once again, that we can only deal (safely) with tendencies, shades, and degrees, since an entirely oral culture, unaffected by writing or the influence of literacy, is a rare phenomenon. When sociolinguist Deborah Tannen summarizes the results of research comparing the relation of events, as narratives, by ethnic group (cited in Shiffrin 1981:960-61), it is not the same thing as comparing literate with non-literate groups. Greeks used verbal strategies associated with oral traditions, while Americans invoked those of literate traditions. But the claim could never be made that Greece is a pre-literate culture, or that even in its most remote fastnesses its citizens are untouched by print. Nevertheless, we want to be able to describe, however speculatively and uncertainly, the nature of an oral tradition, difficult as that is. Finnegan (1977:259) wrote a paragraph refuting some of the excesses of Marshall McLuhan’s overgeneralizations about orality, commenting that “a full refutation would inevitably fill a book.” She chose to cite McLuhan’s claims of the relative passivity and democratic ethos of oral cultures, noting the “aristocratic and aggressive ethos of the Zulu king Shaka” and the intensely meditative poetry of the Eskimos.

One of the innately appropriate uses of literacy is the compilation and preservation of data sets: lists, modern economic systems, capitalist or socialist, could not exist without literacy. Complicated accounting procedures (and ones not so complicated at that) and the storage of resultant data demand writing. So do

records, files, bookkeeping, diaries, and the calculations stimulated by these procedures. Worker's wage and tax records are stored by the hour, day, week, or year; chronology, as typified by our dependence on the calendar, precise dating, and precise sequences must all have writing, if not print. So too with histories and other records of the past, in fact the very notion of the past as a series of datable events that happened then—all depend on writing. Ong argues that writing was invented in order to make lists (1982:99):

Indeed, writing was in a sense invented largely to make something like lists: by far most of the earliest writing we know, that in the cuneiform script of the Sumerians beginning around 1500 BC, is accountkeeping. Primary oral cultures commonly situate their equivalent of lists in narrative, as in the catalogue of the ships and captains in the *Iliad* (ii. 461-879)—not an objective tally but an operational display in a story about a war. In the text of the Torah, which set down in writing thought forms still basically oral, the equivalent of geography (establishing the relationship of one place to another) is put into a formulary action narrative (Numbers 33:16 ff.): “Setting out from the desert of Sinai, they camped at Kibroth-hattaavah. Setting out from Hazeroth, they camped at Rithmah. . .”, and so on for many more verses. Even genealogies out of such orally framed tradition are in effect commonly narrative. Instead of recitation of names, we find a sequence of “begats,” of statements of what someone did.

Such sets occur in oral narrative for several reasons. The narrator in oral traditions is inclined to use the mnemonically useful formula, does not mind redundancy, is inclined to exploit balance (the repetition of the simple subject-predicate-object aids recall). The narrative context is far more vivid than a mere list; as Ong neatly puts it, “the persons are not immobilized as in a police line-up, but are doing something—namely begetting” (99).

Not to dispute those pious scholars and laymen who believe that Scripture is literally true in a sense that would be comprehensible to a literate historian, but oral traditions are rarely accurate with the precision of those who keep written records. This is one of its strengths. Useless data are forgotten in an oral tradition, while remembered phenomena are updated—made

consistent with current beliefs and attitudes. Jack Goody tells the story (1968:33) of Gonja myths (of northern Ghana) at the beginning of this century which explained the seven political subdivisions in terms of the founder and his seven sons, each of whom succeeded to the paramountcy in turn following the father's death. Fifty years later two of these subdivisions had been absorbed, for one reason or another, and British anthropologists collecting in the area found that the myths now described the founder and his five sons. The geneologies were altered to fit the facts of political reality during a half-century of serial remembering of etiological legends. And, Goody concludes, a similar process will transmute other elements of culture, even sacred lore, such as myths.

Literate societies do not and cannot alter their past as can an oral culture, or at least not in the same way:

Instead, their members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical enquiry becomes possible. This in turn encourages scepticism; and scepticism, not only about the legendary past, but about received ideas about the universe as a whole (Goody 1968:67-68).

Hence the literate's suspiciousness, that is, the academic's suspiciousness, of orality and oral tradition. Oral literature is respectable (with a very few exceptions) only if it has come down to us in manuscript form.

Research in this area, it will come as no surprise, has been hard to come by. Anthropologists with linguistic expertise are available, but the purely oral society is not. Much of the work of American linguists on orality has thus been necessarily on speech among Americans, none of whom have been non- or pre-literates. It is not the same thing; but it is the only research that has been done. Deborah Tannen summarized much of the work conducted to date in a recent article in *Language*; some of her observations are nonetheless pertinent here, since the similarities between written and oral discourse (of literature) are demonstrated (1982:2-16).

She found that literary discourse is not substantially different from "ordinary conversation," but is actually quite similar to it. Using features traditionally felt to be literary—sound patterning, word repetition, and so forth—she coincidentally argued against

those who still believe that oral qualities are detectable when such a performance is fixed in textual form. The speakers interviewed by Labov (1972) in his now seminal research used both oral and literate strategies in spoken discourse; one might well argue that rather than being “natural,” Labov’s informants were probably influenced in their narrative constructions by the conventions of our literary heritage. The influence of literacy is impossible to escape in our society; in primary classrooms the discourse of children was analyzed and found to be a preparation for literacy.

Recent sociolinguistic research confirms that storytelling in conversation is based on “audience participation in inferred meaning” (Tannen 1982:4); among Clackamas tales, episodic transitions are sparse—sometimes just a morpheme—the audience filling in the details (Jacobs 1971:213). The effect of conversation, and narrative in conversation, involves and moves the auditor(s). Labov found that ordinary conversation shows a much more complex structure than oral narratives. In research that compared oral narratives with written versions by the same informant, the oral renderings were more expressive, the written stories more content-focused. Writing compacts narrative, integrating its verbal units more tightly. Yet when informants were asked to write imaginative prose—a “short story”—the result was lengthier; written imaginative literature combines the facility of involvement of spoken language with the integrative quality of writing. Lakoff has shown that many features of ordinary conversation are also in popular contemporary writing (cited in Tannen 1982:4). Parallelism and intonations thought to be basic in poetry are also basic in face-to-face conversation. And further assimilating the two styles—if there are two—is the finding of researchers that informants’ written versions of stories used alliteration and assonance, traits associated with orality. Yet, for our purposes—a description of an oral tradition in a non-literate society—the above conclusions are at best tangential, useful mainly in discussion of orally derived text-literature. They show how speech affects our writing and vice versa; and that is not the same as the situation in a traditional society.

Oral tradition is the transmission of cultural items from one member to another, or others. Those items are heard, stored in memory, and, when appropriate, recalled at the moment of subsequent transmission. Several disciplines—anthropology and folklore, but sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics as well can shed

light on such a situation—attempt to describe a world, one which participants of a literate world can barely begin to imagine. In an off-handed line, Levi-Strauss comments that “ethnology is first of all psychology” (1966:131).

Memory, to repeat, is a vital human process in transmission. Psychologists break this down to four functioning categories: verbatim, gist, episodic, and general memory. Verbatim memory is the least frequently used in the lifeworld, certainly in oral traditions, though it is not unheard of. Passages are remembered by piecing together retrievable data, and then by giving them coherence by filling them out with supplementary information; it has been shown that people listen for meaning unless otherwise motivated, and not for verbatim wording (Clark and Clark 1977:134). We all assume that Albert Friedman was right when he wrote that memorization is the basic vehicle of oral tradition (cited in Finnegan 1971:53), but that memory is not a simple phenomenon. It is not a reduplicative process, for instance, but a procedure of creative reconstruction.

Memory for prose—written, alas, in Clark and Clark’s cited experiment, and not transmitted orally—depends primarily on four factors: the type and style of the language to be passed on; the situation of the listener at input; the interval of retention; and the circumstances and purposes of the output. Once again, though these conclusions about the influence on oral transmission were deduced from experiments with literate subjects, they seem to be largely true of transmission in general.

Controlled experiments have demonstrated the ability of long-term memory to store verbatim forms alone. Herbert and Eve Clark (1971:136) refer to those Hausa-speaking Nigerians who have memorized the Koran and who do not know any classical Arabic. The ability is not at all rare. Somali poets commonly memorize their poems, even those that take several evenings for a complete recital (Finnegan 1977:74). She also reports that memorization was centrally involved in the recitation of Cambian epics of *Sinjata*, and that Ruandan and South African praise poems are usually memorized. When Finnegan leaves Africa, where she has done so much fieldwork, she is on slightly less firm turf; the 40,000-line *Rgveda* is cited, composed more than a millennium before the birth of Christ, and said to have been transmitted verbatim (1977:122, 135). But this judgment has recently been questioned, since it is thought that the transmitters of the *Rgveda*

may have occasionally consulted manuscripts for accuracy. Such a theory would bear out the report of Clark and Clark that memory for verbatim wording is rapidly lost, and over the long haul what is retained is the meaning.

But, although illiterates do try for verbatim repetition (Ong 1982:62), they seldom achieve it, except in short genres, and in the rare cases cited above. Jacobs reported that his informants probably transmitted their older myths with “something close” to phrase and sentence memorization, in “some if not all episodes” (1971:268). But his diachronic experience with the Clackamas was limited, and he really could not be sure.

Parry had defined the formula as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (1930:80). For many of his disciples the phrase “regularly employed” came to mean “repeatedly employed.” For Lord, Magoun, Duggan, and others, formulicity became an indisputable sign of oral composition. And we all now concede that the most marked trait of orature is repetition—of some sort. Yet there is no universality of opinion about those aspects of the formula that must be repeated in order to “qualify”; metrical, syntactical, and semantic elements have all been considered, but vary in varying oralatures. Even the length of a putative formula is questioned: linguist H. L. Rogers (1966) questioned the failure of literary scholars to define with satisfactory precision any of the components of Parry’s formula. Joseph Russo (1976) argues that a fuller and more rigorously analyzed sample of Homeric verse might not support the claims for a higher formulaic content in the epics, and that the overall level of formulicity might prove to be little higher than that assumed for literary texts. Further research has not borne out Russo’s suspicions, and despite all the modifications and reservations expressed about the oral-formulaic theory, Milman Parry did make us aware of that characteristic of oral narrative, the repetitive formula, however and in whatever way repetitive. Repetition may not be the “touchstone” of oral poetry (Finnegan 1977:130), but it occurs so often that Ong can meaningfully speak of “the oral drive to use formulas” (1982:99).

Formulas, of whatever sort, are memory aids almost entirely. Too much has been made of the audience’s liking for familiar language because of its comforting aspects; it is more likely that aural participants in orature performances like formulas and familiarity of plot because they can participate more than passively,

not as active performers, but neither merely receptively like modern hushed audiences at a poetry reading. Experiments have shown that listeners filter out what they consider to be errors (many traditional audiences will correct errors as they occur, aloud); the auditor stores in memory only what is thought to be correct, or what is thought was intended. Passages are relatively easy to memorize if they are meaningful, and in the listener's native language. Grammaticality is also important, as is brevity; rhyme is an aid to memorization, as is metricality (Clark and Clark 1971:138-41).

In memory people store kernel sentences and the necessary notation that will account for a transformation when the sentences are recalled; the process of output "makes note" of the necessary transformations and appropriately transforms the stored kernel sentence. American speakers, at least—those from whom these results were observed—are biased toward active sentences in memory, and to subject priority. There seems to be also a preference for an "order-of-mention-contract," supporting Labov's thesis that recalled personal experiences are related with a chronology that matches that of the actual events. The comparative is easier to remember (over the equative), as are positive statements over negative ones.

Inferences are stored, and when recalled, often mistaken for their inferences in the original sentence. A major source of confusion is people's inclination to integrate new information with that of their world knowledge before storing; at recall it is often difficult to remember which pieces of information were acquired when. All known facts regarding a single entity are clustered around a "single point," and that organization controls recall (Clark and Clark 1971:156-60). Thus, Jacobs (1971:249 ff.) found that his Clackamas stories and myths did not explain nature, people, or customs; explicitness was unnecessary because certain memory cues in the narrative would evoke the relevant message. In such a traditional society, just the titles of stories were sufficient to explain the plot to the audience. Everyone participated in the tribe's literary heritage, so that the meaning of each narrative was effectively conveyed to all members briefly and without the sense of moralizing.

Information at the instant of input is made consonant with the listener's "global representation" of reality; and, as noted, in a traditional society that global representation will more closely

represent group values and attitudes than in a literate one. Recall will reflect this construction, even if it is inaccurate or wrong. Memory is reconstructive in any case. But the individual's global representations, made at the moment of input, have already shaped the information according to his or her background and experience, so that the recalled product may be relatively divorced from the original source of information (Clark and Clark 1971:164). The same phenomenon occurs during the communicative process of stories. Listeners build global representations of elements of the heard narratives, with the results (sharpening, leveling, rationalization) described by Bartlett (1932).

The Finns codified the kinds of "mistakes" ("variations" is more objective and is actually much closer to the evaluative truth of the situation) which they found in their field experience. In songs, single verses or groups of them are displaced, while some segments are dropped altogether. Forgetting was increasingly frequent when the performer was outside his or her community or family, another evidence of the stabilizing role of an informed traditional audience. Details superfluous to "the main theme" are the first to disappear from a narrative. Specific traits may be generalized and specified, the result of partial recall loss; or details may be repeated or expanded (Krohn 1971:66, 56-72).

All of these processes conspire to alter the details in the transmission of narratives (as of ordinary facts), to get it "wrong." Stories in our culture are goal-oriented (Clark and Clark 1971:170), and even though many of the details are altered in transmission, the goals of the narrative tend to be preserved. That leaves a great deal of room for variation; and it is another demonstration of the fragility of interpreting traditional narratives from the text alone. Stories may be shortened by reducing causative agents, initiators, and enabling events, with no loss of meaning to an experienced audience, as Jacobs found. Yet such a truncated story would seem to bear little relation to an analogue distended with detail, compared on the basis of transcriptions alone.

Rumelhart (1977) found that the listeners he observed structured their own hierarchies of heard stories, and their recall was determined by this structure. Those aspects so ordered were setting, event, action, change of state, the internal and overt responses of characters, and so on. Listeners arranged these components when they formed, at input, their own global representations of the story. In recall, this hierarchy was

reconstructed. The classic psycholinguistic study of the effect of memory on storytelling is Bartlett's, often cited by folklorists but always with qualifications. And rightly so; Bartlett's subjects were Cambridge University students, not the homogeneous group one finds in a traditional society. The narratives were transmitted to each student in writing, not orally. And the narratives used in these experiments were not native to the students, but, as nearly all have remarked, somewhat strange and exotic. Consequently, the Cambridge students made many more alterations in transmitting these tales than would be true of the native transmission of familiar material. For instance, Bartlett noted the tendency to rationalize certain magical or otherwise supernatural elements; but this is just what we would expect from students at Cambridge University who were relating an unfamiliar story filled with magical elements in which they did not believe.

In recent years reader-oriented criticism has stressed the role of the receiver in the aesthetic transaction. In oral tradition the listener is even more important in several respects, certainly important in understanding the oral tradition itself. Since Lord we have all become aware of the oral poet's instant responses to his oral audience, and to his flexibility in reacting to them. If the performance is not going well, the reciter usually has several techniques for livening audience interest (more dramatic gesture, more engaging expression, more eye contact); or he can abbreviate the performance, cutting his losses. The writer has no such audience awareness. In some societies the group involves itself quite actively, as in Hawaiian oral poetry where the composition is collaborative, insuring a precise transmission of traditional materials (Finnegan 1977:85-86). Melville Jacobs (1971:211) likens an oral performer to a Western actor, the performance to theater, not a brilliant or an original metaphor, but one that usefully describes the situation. It is a theater where the audience is free to correct the performer. The older Clackamas listeners made corrections of phrases and even specific words during the recital of myths. And at story recitals a full discussion of the plot (both during and after recitals) is usual; interruptions were by a theorizing and fantasizing audience (269). The same happens among the Somali, who feel free to correct "faulty" renderings of known poems (Finnegan 1977:74-75). In brief, much more so than with written poetry, an oral audience's aesthetics reflect the purpose and effect of the poem.

One of the American folk preachers whose performances I recorded for my own research in a domestic oral tradition of formulaic composition (1970:103-4) was instantly able to correct errors he had just made in his own performance; the correction formulas of Rev. Rufus Hays appeared to be spontaneous, and not pre-formed such as the one Finnegan notes during the singing of Yoruba hunter's songs. In the latter situation other expert singers may be present, and if they feel that a mistake has been made they will interrupt the singer with some such formula as, "You have told a lie, you are hawking loaves of lies. . . listen to the correct version now. . . Your version is wrong. . ." (Finnegan 1977:232).

Edson Richmond once remarked to me that folklore was everything that didn't get communicated when an oral performance is transcribed. The performance situation is vital; it throbs. Lord (1960) noted that when his *guslari* dictated their poems the meter—the meter of the rapid oral communication—broke down and that nearly all elements of the performance were affected. Jacobs noted the same among his informants (1971:221). Linguists have found that when subjects are asked to write out versions of stories they have been reciting orally, the written versions are different also: more compact and more integrated (Tannen 1982:8).

The best stories, oral as well as written (as many think), say the least while evoking the most.¹ In oral traditions brief statements are often evocative of a substantial recall. Narratives that allow the audience a maximum of imaginative creativity are the most successful (Jacobs 1971:21). In this way the auditors participate in the performance in a creative way; they feel as though they are a creative part of the performance in active, participatory ways that the reader is not. Repetitive language enables an audience to anticipate not only the narrative elements to come, but the phrasing as well. Empowered to criticize, oral/aural audiences are genuinely part of the performance, creatively and not merely passively.

Axel Olrik's famous "epic laws" of oralature are both well enough known not to need repeating here, but must at this point be cited, at least in outline.² Olrik observed, to condense greatly, that oral narratives do not begin or end abruptly, but move from calm to excitement (and vice versa at their conclusion); threes, in repetitions, in the numbers of characters and events and in details, abound, and have for millennia in the West; only two characters

appear in one scene at any time (if more, only two speak at one time); the oral narrative is polarized as to character types and plot genre³; twins violate this “law,” as though weakened, and are unable to occupy a major role in the action—when they do they are subject to the “law of contrast”; folk narrative is comprised of tableaux scenes, has a unity of plot, and concentrates on a leading character (as summarized in Dundes 1965:131-41).

In a more general way, thinking in an oral culture takes place in mnemonic patterns, “shaped for ready oral occurrence” (Ong 1982:34). The oral style of discourse is more focused, slower-moving, frequently redundant. Oral poetry tends to be additive rather than being organized by subordination (*ibid.*:37-40). The characters in such narratives are noticeably “heavy” character types, rarely three-dimensional, and monumental⁴; their creators strive to make them memorable. Oral cultures do not organize long, climactic narratives; climactic plots are not natural, do not conform with events in the lifeworld (*ibid.*:70, 143). Yet oral narratives can be lengthy (narratives quite aside from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, whose “oralness” needs several pages of qualification and explanation); Stith Thompson singles out “vagabonds” as individuals who often “string out their stories to an inordinate length,” while some tellers elaborate their tales to an extraordinary degree while keeping “the old general pattern” (1977:451-52).

Keeping to the “general” pattern is the most exact mode that nearly all oral transmitters are capable of. Precision, as already noted, is a product of writing. An oral culture cannot deal in geometric figures, abstract categorization, or formal logic; and illiterates cannot organize “elaborate concatenations of causes” (Ong 1982:55-57). It is print that fosters tight and intricate plotting, such as we take for granted in the detective story and the spy novel. Goody and Watt similarly observe:

The same process of dissection into abstract categories, when applied not to a particular argument but to the ordering of all the elements of experience into separate areas of intellectual activity, leads to the Greek division of knowledge into autonomous cognitive disciplines which has since become universal in Western culture and which is of cardinal importance in differentiating literate and non-literate cultures (Goody 1968:54).

Inaccuracy and reduced intellectual performance (of certain analytic processes) occasionally deplored by cerebral literates are certainly present. Yet much of the contempt felt by literates for the unlettered is not justified. Lévi-Strauss has shown how some of the most important aspects of “the savage mind” (1966) are merely differently coded expressions of the same fundamental thoughts of sophisticated cultures; “savage mind” (*la pensée sauvage*) is in itself an ironic statement intended by the author, since savages are not, popularly, supposed to have sophisticated thought at all. Yet, not only do totemic societies evolve cerebrally intricate structures; they also reflect on the nature of poetry (Finnegan 1977:236).

Economic development as well as literacy does not seem to influence the flourishing of poetry; among certain Polynesian societies praise poems are felt to belong to certain families, and at times a member’s claim to rank may depend upon his power to reproduce, “letter-perfect,” his family chants and his “name song.” Many oral poets are among their society’s elite. Among the Clackamas upper class, life is depicted in the poems of the oral tradition (Jacobs 1971:176).

Ong concludes *Orality and Literacy* with the remarks that while no one wants to advocate illiteracy, and while every oral culture in his knowledge wants to acquire the ability to read once it has been exposed to the possibility, oral cultures have produced “creations beyond the reach of literates, for example, the *Odyssey*” (175). The list should be extended; and it could be extended to include those written works which have also enjoyed an extensive oral currency: Marlowe’s “Come Live With Me and Be My Love” and Raleigh’s reply were printed anonymously on broadsheets, and were sung (as were many poems) by broadside street peddlers. The poems of Burns are still recited aloud today. Writing co-exists peacefully with orality; it is not its executioner.

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Notes

¹Although linguists define literate strategies as supplying maximal background information and “connective tissue” (e.g., Tannen 1982:3).

²For a general account, see Dundes 1965:129-41.

³Ong (1982:45) observes that oral culture is full of praise as well as vituperation, reflecting polarization.

⁴Ong (1982:152) insists that round characters are not possible.

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