

**Innervision and Innertext:  
Oral and Interpretive  
Modes of Storytelling Performance**

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**Introduction**

Within the past twenty years there has evolved a national—even, to a limited extent, an international—community of performers who position themselves under the sign of a self-conscious revival of traditional storytelling. Although their actual practices cover a wide range of performance conventions—from a variety of ethnic traditional storytelling styles, to stand-up comedy, to theatrical impersonation, to autobiographical performance art, to oral interpretation—these contemporary performers share in the invocation of ancient traditions and roles as a common signifying framework.

In the proliferation of storytelling festivals around the country we find the image of the fireside folk teller projected onto a popular stage, framed by tents and spotlights, magnified by public relations machinery, amplified by the latest sound technology, all to satisfy mass hunger for a restored sense of rootedness. “The Storyteller” has developed a certain iconic resonance in popular culture, more as a poetic conceit than as an anthropologically specific role, much as “The Folk Singer” did in the early sixties. Yet the conceit depends for its emotive force on the idea that somewhere, sometime, there is, or was, such a role—a role with expressive, didactic, oracular, and community-binding functions. Enough people have resubscribed to the idea over the last twenty years to have created little subcultural pockets of “restored behaviors” (Schechner 1985:35-116). These subcultural pockets, taken collectively, constitute what is emically known as “the storytelling community.”

A good deal of this activity is suspect or alien to folklorists, whose

passion is for the unvarnished stuff. Yet our occupational boundaries should not bar us from observing the occupational and listening communities that have grown up among professional storytellers and enthusiasts; nor from studying the ways their inherited and invented traditions, contexts, and performance conventions reflect, refract, and transform traditional storytelling practices. By doing so we may learn a great deal about how oral and literate strata of communication interact within a particular hothouse laboratory of contemporary performance, under the evolutionary grow lamps of secondary orality.

A more thorough examination of contemporary storytelling in the light of its constituent traditions is in preparation (Sobol forthcoming). I will focus here on constructing a polarity of communicative models within the practice of professional storytelling, and using this polarity, then, to reflect on the movement's sources, its place, and its prospects: I will call these models the *conversational* and the *literary*, or the *oral traditional* and *oral interpretive* modes.

### **The Issues**

In lieu of reviewing the broad scholarly debate that has grown up in recent decades over the nature and implications of orality and literacy in culture, it will suffice to say here that, ever since Milman Parry's groundbreaking work with oral epic singers in the Balkans in the 1930s, scholars from an impressively wide range of disciplinary perspectives have seized on the oral/literate polarity as a field for the modeling of culture and communication. Havelock in classics, McLuhan in literary history, Ong in theological history—all have been inspired by the ideas of Parry and Lord to move beyond the received boundaries of their fields. Scholars of folklore (Bauman, Finnegan, Hymes, Tedlock, Toelken), literature (Foley, Zumthor), speech communication (Fine, Speer), cultural anthropology (Goody), cultural history and criticism (Sayre, Trinh), sociolinguistics (Chafe, Lakoff, Polanyi, Tannen), cognitive and educational psychology (Olson, Stein and Trabasso), and other fields have contributed to the interdisciplinary ferment. Their multifarious writings do not lend themselves to neat summary. I will content myself here with drawing a set of five key propositions that can be applied to the performance of contemporary storytellers.

First, there is the proposition that the storytelling revival movement,

along with the performance-based approach to folkloristics,<sup>1</sup> the move among practitioners of oral interpretation towards truly oral, folkloric sources,<sup>2</sup> the movement among contemporary poets towards oral and performative modes of literary expression,<sup>3</sup> and the movement among theatre artists towards orally-created, narrative modes of performance as opposed to conventional textual and dramatic methods, constitute a range of synchronistic and in many ways synergistic phenomena.

In the introduction to her important synthesis, *The Folklore Text*, Fine points out that the performance approach, “which views folklore as a dynamic communicative process rather than an artifact from the past, has attuned folklorists to the significance of studying performance,” while in the same period “oral interpretation has turned its attention to its historical roots in folklore” (2). As folklorists like Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock pondered the lessons that only live performance could teach, they began not only to seek more accurate ways to notate performances, but also to attempt to interpret their collected texts through the act of performance, to experience in their own bodies the ways these stories might live in the performative moment. In Hymes’s breakthrough into performance of one of his Northwest Indian stories during his 1974 presidential address to the American Folklore Society, lay a similar reoralizing impulse to that animating the first fledgling storytelling festivals across the country at that time.

Hymes and Tedlock were major influences on the oral poetry movement of the seventies, particularly through Tedlock and Rothenberg’s *Alcheringa*, a journal of ethno-poetics. Henry M. Sayre (1989:181) writes, “. . .the political thrust of ethno-poetics entails an alignment against the homogeneous, single world which is imaged in the essentially imperialist concept of the ‘melting pot’ and the advocacy, instead, of a plural world of distinct, coequal, and balanced ‘ecosystems’”—a world, in other words, of many dialects, as opposed to the single, hegemonic “grapholect.” This is a cultural political agenda that has long been enacted on the stages of the storytelling “circuit” as well. Paul Sills’ production of Brothers Grimm tales, *Story Theatre*, itself a popularization of academic oral interpretation techniques like Robert Breen’s “Chamber Theatre,” toured the country in

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<sup>1</sup> See Bauman 1977, 1986; Paredes and Bauman 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See Fine 1984, Speer 1978.

<sup>3</sup> See Rothenberg and Rothenberg 1983, Sayre 1989, and Tedlock 1983.

the seventies, bringing a major new technical resource to the popularizing of folktales in performance. Sills' mixture of narrative and freely shifting characterization was adopted by regional-activist theatre companies and professional storytellers alike in turning previously overlooked folklore and oral history material into effective populist theatre. All of this performative ferment between oral and literate expressive dominants is crucial to the theme that I am developing here.

When we turn to examining the texture of oral traditional and oral interpretive modes of performance, we find the proposition advanced by Chafe (1982) concerning the very different *tempos* natural to the different uses of language: face-to-face conversation, writing, and reading. Speaking, he notes, is far faster than writing, if only because of the physical mechanisms involved; but speaking and listening are both slower than reading. In spontaneous conversational speech, we become accustomed to a certain rhythmic fit between the pace of our thoughts and that of the language in which we express it (37):

Observation of spontaneous spoken language has led various investigators independently to the finding that it is produced in spurts, sometimes called idea units, with a mean length (including hesitations) of approximately two seconds or approximately six words each. Idea units typically have a coherent intonation contour, they are typically bounded by pauses, and they usually exhibit one of a small set of syntactic structures. They are a striking, probably universal component of spoken language.... If that is true, then when we speak we are in the habit of moving from one idea to the next at the rate of about one every two seconds. Perhaps that is even our normal "thinking rate," if language reflects the pace of thought.... If that is our temporal baseline, the activity of writing presents a problem. If we write more than ten times more slowly than we speak, what is happening in our thoughts during that extra time? . . . In writing, it would seem, our thoughts must constantly get ahead of our expression of them in a way to which we are totally unaccustomed when we speak. As we write down one idea, our thoughts have plenty of time to move ahead to others. The result is, we have time to integrate a succession of ideas into a single linguistic whole in a way that is not available in speaking.

Chafe uses this distinction to account for the the far greater syntactic density and complexity commonly found in written, as compared to spoken, discourse. The writer, poking over his typewriter or pacing, like Flaubert, around his garden pulling out his hair over one choice word, "loads" his semantic units with surplus information, so that the reader, skimming along in his armchair free of the complexities of face-to-face interaction, can have

plenty of material to take up the communicative slack. These same informational riches in the restored performative context can overload the communicative channels, unless the right rhythmic fit can be discovered between voice, breath, utterance, and audience.

Next, there is the proposition, advanced by both Chafe and Tannen in *Spoken and Written Language* (1982) and elaborated by Tannen in *Talking Voices* (1989), that conversational discourse is characterized by linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic “involvement strategies,” designed to create interaction and integration between speaker and listener. Linguistic involvement strategies, such as repetition, constructed dialogue, and representational imagery, are common to oral and literary storytelling, though originating in speech. Paralinguistic and kinesic involvement strategies can include variation in pitch and tempo, gesture, physical and emotional mirroring, as well as the vast register of implicit information that constitutes the *relationship* of conversational partners. None of these are available to the writer, except in a refracted and distanced form. He has to rely instead on a range of “contextualizing” conventions to fill in what is sacrificed to print. Thus it has become a byword among linguists and literary scholars to say that writing aims at the status of “autonomous discourse,” or “context-free communication” (e.g., Olson 1977, Rader 1982). As Walter J. Ong (1982:78-79) puts it,

Oral cultures know a kind of autonomous discourse in fixed ritual formulas. . . as well as in vatic sayings or prophecies, for which the utterer himself or herself is considered only the channel, not the source. The Delphic oracle was not responsible for her oracular utterances, for they were held to be the voice of the god. Writing, and even more print, has some of this vatic quality. Like the oracle or the prophet, the book relays an utterance from a source, the one who really “said” or wrote the book.

Fourth, there is the proposition that takes up much of McLuhan’s later work, and is developed in various ways by Heim (1987) and Lakoff (1982), among others: that the accelerating transformation in the dominant media of culture toward electronic information-processing is tilting society dizzyingly quickly away from literacy and towards what McLuhan calls “secondary orality”—media that are based upon the analytic capacities born of print, but that return the sensory load to an aural, or a mixed aural and concrete visual dimension (as opposed to the abstract visual processing required by alphabetic writing). In her contribution to *Spoken and Written Language*, Lakoff (1982:259) attempts the extreme view:

Now access to all the information one previously gained through literacy can be gained by other means, via newer media, and we see that it is the younger people who are the first to recognize this and become able to take advantage of it. Literacy will shortly not be essential for simple survival anymore, nor will there be any need to preserve it except as a curiosity or an atavistic skill, like quilt making, learned and proudly practiced by a few.

One can disagree with this rather parodic scenario and still accept the important points: that cultural canons based on Eurocentric fixations on the divine status of literacy are bound to be relativized by omniverous new global technologies; and that, barring some final catastrophe, we can have no idea what new human sensory adaptations future media may bring into play.

Finally, there is the proposition, argued by Ruth Finnegan in her opus-*contra*-Ong, *Literacy and Orality*, and implied in many of the essays in *Spoken and Written Language* (especially those of Heath, Polanyi, and Rader): that the very notion of an oral/literate continuum is an empirically problematic one. While oral and literate modes of language do unquestionably exist in functioning communities, including communities of professional performers, the ways in which these modes interact are multifarious and protean—certainly far, in practice, from the linear image of a continuum. Finnegan shows by examples from ancient Ireland and contemporary Africa and Polynesia that modes of composition and performance of traditional poetry and story can vary widely from culture to culture, though each may be broadly classed as non-literate. And in cultures where literacy is dominant, there remain realms of practical resistance and residual orality, from jokes, urban legends, or personal experience narratives to the domains of manual skill and apprenticeship. Similarly, Heath concludes her study of the uses of oral and literate modes (which she calls speech events and literacy events) in an African-American textile-mill community with this cautionary note (1982:111):

Descriptions of. . . literacy events and their patterns of uses in Trackton do not enable us to place the community somewhere on a continuum from full literacy to restricted literacy or non-literacy. Instead, it seems more appropriate to think of two continua, the oral and the written. Their points and extent of overlap, and similarities in structure and function, follow one pattern for Trackton, but follow others for communities with different cultural features.

Since these models are constructions in any case, related to but in no way identical with the linguistic systems to which they refer, we might

allow ourselves to reach for something more poetically ample to replace altogether the stick-figures of continuum or continua—something along the lines of Yeats's pair of intersecting gyres, one widening as the other narrows, revolving together in phases like the moon in relation to the earth and sun, and pouring their changing, refractive light over the living fields of human communication.

### **The Action**

The distinction between oral traditional and oral interpretive modes of storytelling is based on the way the teller learns and prepares to retell her stories. In the conversational or oral traditional mode, the teller hears the story from another teller, or, in the case of stories based on personal experience or invention, experiences the story in the flesh, in the ear, and in the imagination. She then proceeds to retell it *without the intervention of a written version*. She develops and polishes the performance, in the mode by which the story was originally conceived, in the flesh, the ear, and the imagination—that is, in the experience of retelling and rehearsing the story with audiences. In the literary or oral interpretive mode, on the other hand, the teller begins with a written text, whether of her own or another's devising, and commits this text to memory. She then overlays paralinguistic, performative elements of facial, vocal, and kinesic expression and timing upon the preset verbal scaffolding, whether in the rehearsal process or in the heat of performance.

It is obvious that only in a Platonically ideal performance could either of these polar paradigms be realized. The purest "traditional" tellers today are likely to have had some contact with written versions of their own traditional yarns (Oxford 1987:190-93). Tellers who develop their own original stories in conversational performance can yet find themselves shaping phrases and passages with a lapidary precision that implies some "visual" relationship to the contours of the language itself. And tellers with the strictest reliance on literary norms may be forced to adapt their words to the momentary inspiration of performance. Examples of these kinds of intersections are given below. There is an identifiable weaving, a gyring, between these polar fields of language-performance, and tellers on the revival circuit can generally be identified by a gravitational tilt towards one or the other. I will concentrate here on a pair of seasoned professional tellers, Jim May and Syd Lieberman, to show how their performances have evolved from their positions along the widening and narrowing gyres of

orality and literacy.

### **The Actors**

I first heard Jim May and Syd Lieberman tell stories one right after the other, during an open swap at the National Conference on Storytelling in Jonesborough, Tennessee. They were friends, both schoolteachers from upstate Illinois working their way into the burgeoning profession of storytelling. They were egging each other on, and their performances that night marked a crystallization for each of them of a new dimension of personal voice. Working my way into the art form myself, I was struck that night by what seemed a polarity between their styles. Whatever Jim said, even when he was actually reciting, seemed conversational, emergent, spontaneous to the point of a certain appealing hesitancy. Whatever Syd said seemed by contrast recited, shaped, and polished, strongly sensible of the literary arc of his words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs. The occasion crystallized an awareness that had been growing in me of divergent modes within what presented itself as a united movement. Jim May and Syd Lieberman have helped me, since that night in 1984, with my own developing understanding of the complex interrelationship of these performance modes. The brief comparative study of their performing styles essayed below is based on personal acquaintance, on encounters with their live and taped performances over a six-year period, and on recent telephone interviews with each.

May and Lieberman are both full-time professional storytellers born, reared, and based in upstate Illinois. They are both in their forties, and both are former teachers who used storytelling as a teaching tool. Each discovered from his own experience, as well as from observing other revival tellers, that storytelling could also be a path of self-expression, and, not insignificantly, of self-employment.

Jim May is of German Catholic descent, raised in the tiny McHenry County village of Spring Grove, on a fourth-generation family farm. Personal and family memoirs of rural and small-town life form a large part of his repertoire. He often introduces a set of stories by saying that he grew up on a dairy farm, population nine; then moved into Spring Grove, population two thousand; as soon as he could he went off to the University of Illinois, population thirty thousand, to major in Russian history and urban problems; and now, in his forties, he is back living in Spring Grove, collecting and telling stories about it. It is a modest, stand-up comic echo

of Eliot's famous coda to the *Four Quartets*:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive at where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

It is the nature of oral transmission, when a performance is truly received, to be not simply oral, but a full-body imprinting, a human technology of which video-recording is a pale imitation. In experiencing a particular storyteller's style, one can usually sense the echoes in her bodily memory of the kinds of tellers and settings that have imprinted themselves upon her. The first professional tellers to make a strong impression on Jim were Ray Hicks and Jackie Torrance, both rural North Carolina tellers based in the oral conversational mode. After hearing these two during his first trip to the National Storytelling Festival in Tennessee, Jim came back Monday morning to his history class and decided to do something different: he threw away his lesson plan and told a folktale, "Soldier Jack," which he had heard both Ray and Jackie tell over the weekend. It was certainly not a memorized telling, but an oral re-creation. Elements of both versions mingled in his mind and fused with his own laconic, midwestern vocal rhythms to produce a spontaneous piece of verbal art, based on the old motifs. "Those kids had never listened to me that way before," he says.

It was the beginning of a performing style. But behind that there is a deeper imprint of family oral tradition. The running joke in a bar he sometimes visits in Spring Grove goes, "Who would believe that Jim May makes a living telling stories? Everybody knows that his brother is the real storyteller in the family." Jim's older brother runs a local construction company, for which Jim used to work during the summer. "I guess a lot of my real storytelling education came on coffee breaks with those guys," he told me. "It was like a constant audition. You couldn't *impress* those guys. You had to learn restraint."

Jim's brother was a trickster character, a self-employed liar who created his own exploits for the telling, sometimes after the fact, often without recourse to fact. "He would drive up in the truck and you'd ask him where he'd been, and he'd say Afghanistan. Things like that. He would talk in a made-up language. Long strings of nonsense words." Jim tells of a time his brother told the principal of their parochial school, Father John, that he'd seen a fox run under the chicken house. Father John ran to get his shotgun, and the whole school watched out the school windows

while Jim's brother stamped on the floor of the chicken house, Father John circling outside, shotgun at the ready. Of course the only fox was inside the chicken house, dancing.

Events like these, enacted and retold, form the thread out of which Jim weaves his own stories. His speaking style is low-key, almost flat, like the midwestern landscape it represents. He stands with his head slightly bowed, eyebrows arched, like the ex-altar boy that is his narrative persona in many of his personal stories, standing before the altar screen that divides innocence from irony. His personal stories are germinated from seed-memories that spring to life suddenly in a conversation or a workshop, and they are shaped in the retelling—he already knows them, as one knows one's own experience, but performance reveals their shape, their moments, and their momentum.

Jim expects his stories to vary from telling to telling. Sometimes a performance will seem halting, as the conversational teller gropes for new images, and new words to convey them—these hesitations would be damaging to the trust engendered by the performer-audience relationship, were it not for the fact that *words*, in the textual sense, are not the primary standard by which the oral performer builds that trust. He works instead by the standard of involvement and interaction—eye contact, solicitations of agreement, spontaneous remarks to and about the listeners, the feeling that each listener is being directly, excitedly, conversationally addressed, without the performer's attention being diverted by the superego-like intervention of a text. On the other hand, an oral story may become so smoothed by frequent repetition that hesitations and interjections disappear, and its performance assumes the character of a recitation. It may gain then in verbal fluency, and yet lose in communicative force. Some of the tension of Jim's storytelling comes from his navigation between these opposing shoals.

Syd Lieberman grew up on the northwest side of Chicago, in what at that time was a largely Jewish neighborhood. His grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, merchants, traders, and peasants who scrambled for a niche in the new world, laying foundations for their children to build professional careers. Syd's Jewish heritage provides the subject for most of his repertoire: stories of immigrant experience, folktales from Yiddish and especially Hasidic sources, and personal stories that reflect in various ways on the Jewish-American journey from precarious urban refugee to bemused suburban professional.

When asked about the evolution of his storytelling style, he quickly said, "Well, aside from being an English teacher for twenty years, I used to

write feature pieces for local newspapers.” His writing was not fiction—he declares that he has never been capable of that—but what might be called in the trade “color pieces,” character portraits, and reflections on events or themes from his own or his community’s experience. The first stories he told were Jewish folktales, encountered in books or in other told versions. But Syd’s learning process was, and still is, crucial to his performing style. He would write out his own adaptation of the story, shaping it through his literary sensibility to his own developing sense of performative speech. It was this version that he would subsequently learn, adapting it again from his own literary “voice” to his speaking voice.

A professional storyteller who had a major impact on his artistic direction, Syd says, is Jay O’Callahan, a masterful teller from New England who was also a writer before he began performing his own stories. Hearing O’Callahan encouraged Syd to use his own original writing as performance material. Syd is most comfortable thinking of his pieces as writing, as performable literature. Writing them out beforehand gives him space to polish the language within a piece, and to shape the whole so that it feels “finished.” Ong points out that the notion of completion or closure is, excepting only certain ritual contexts, primarily fostered by cultures based on writing (1982:132): “By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved with all else, somehow self-contained, complete.” It is part of Syd’s cultural set that he is most comfortable creating an autonomous, closed structure of this kind before bearing it forth into the open, contingent zone of performance.

Jewish culture has traditionally, of course, for millennia been a culture of the Book. But it is a Book relentlessly re-oralized, by recitation, cantillation, disputation, and exegesis. The result is that, in the Talmudic tradition, the biblical text retains its central place, but in tiny dollops of original wisdom, while on all sides sprout chirographic, residually oral thickets of marginalia: “Rashi said thus, but Simeon ben Yochai said thus,” and so on off the four edges of the page. The process of re-oralizing a lovingly “finished” text opens the interpretive storyteller to a similar inrush of “marginal” responses, which gradually fight their way into a new equipoise with the original. Syd told me:

For a long time after I start to perform a story, the piece keeps changing on me. I’m always shocked when I go back to the written piece a year or so later, and I see how different it’s become with my telling it. Then after a while it begins to settle down again as a told piece, and it stops changing.

The words stop changing. It becomes pretty much the same from one performance to another. And I'm comfortable with that.

When Syd begins a story he has a distinctive preparatory "set": he plants his feet, looks down at the ground and flexes his knees, like a football running back getting ready for the snap (it happens he was a star halfback in high school). Then he takes a deep breath in the same motion as he raises his head, squints at the audience—and speaks. It is a personal physical ritual, which he repeats not only at the beginning of each program but at the beginning of each piece within the program. His voice is a powerful tenor instrument, punching out with cantorial force his Yiddish-American colloquial rhythms, studded with midwestern diphthongs that break so sharply they seem to crack.

By way of illustration, brief excerpts are transcribed below from two of these tellers' personal stories. This version of Jim May's story is titled "Most Valuable Altar Boy" (he usually tells it, coupled with another section, as "Horse-snot, or Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex Education at St. Peter's"). Syd Lieberman's story is called "The Italian T-Shirt." These were the same two tales that I heard them tell back-to-back that night at the storytelling conference. The recordings from which the transcriptions have been done were made within a year of the conference, and both were released in 1985 on self-published cassettes. Jim's was recorded in front of a large group of Catholic church workers, at an early stage in the development of the piece when it still had much of its exploratory feel. Syd's was recorded in front of a neighborhood audience at his own Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation synagogue in Evanston.

Following Chafe, audible "idea units" are numbered and separated by paragraph breaks; laughter is marked by parenthetical exclamation points (!!!), applause by asterisks (\*\*\*), pauses by ellipses (. . .). Four idea units in the Jim May excerpt are represented entirely by ellipses—these indicate pauses in which the ideational content of the previous unit was developed by the teller in concert with the audience, entirely by paralinguistic means.

**From “Most Valuable Altar Boy,” by Jim May**

1. At least in our parish, Heaven had sort of layers,
2. or. . . or, it was sort of like theater tickets. (!!!)
3. And you had the people like, way in the back, kind of the  
second balcony, you know, they—
4. they just—just barely made it in, they—
5. they led *holy but boring lives*. (!!!!)
6. But—but they got to be with God forever, and so that was  
good, but—
7. closer up front, you know, the mezzanine maybe, or, or about  
halfway up there were the—
8. the martyrs. (!!!)
9. Of course that meant you were killed for professing your faith,  
and that was no small thing, and they had more jewels in their  
crown and so forth—
10. But—
11. right up there in the first row, you know,
12. the best place in Heaven,
13. were the virgin martyrs. (!!!!!!!!!!!)
14. . . . .
15. I don’t know how many of you still have a shot at that, but—  
(!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!\*\*\*\*\*!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
16. . . . .
17. I got away with that, you might not be able to stop me now.  
(!!!!!!!!!!!!)
18. Um, but, but the, uh—and of course that meant that—that you  
were killed for professing your faith before you had sex.
19. . . . . (!!!!!!!!!!!!)
20. It didn’t give you much to look forward to....
21. . . . . (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
22. But—we were told this life didn’t matter anyhow, you know.  
(!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
23. So that’s what I was going for—I was—
24. I was nine years old, a certified virgin, I figured I was halfway  
there. (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

**From “The Italian T-Shirt,” by Syd Lieberman**

1. I was babysitting for my two kids. . . . that day.
2. They were two and four at the time.
3. It was a normal day.
4. The usual things were happening: my two year old. . . . was beating his sister over the head with a toy hammer. (!!!)
5. Now he wasn't picking favorites, he had beaten himself over the head for a while too. (!!!!!!)
6. My daughter, the more artistic type, was squeezing margarine into Henry Moore-type sculptures, (!)
7. or sandpainting with the sugar she had spilled all over the kitchen floor.
8. I tried to get some work done—
9. I kept getting calls:
10. An insurance company, they wanted to sign me up, a car agency had a good buy, they were gonna fix me up, a heavy breather wanted to pick me up— (!!!!)
11. Huh! Huh! Huh! I thought he had emphysema when I got on the phone.
12. As I said, normal things were happening:
13. a five hundred-piece-puzzle fell off a shelf, got mixed up with another five-hundred-piece puzzle. (!!!)
14. A faucet sprung a leak,
15. and a quart of milk spilled—
16. in the refrigerator.
17. And then things got worse.
18. I took out the garbage, and the bag broke.
19. I stood there, like the man in the Glad Bag ad, watching dirty diapers blow all over the backyard.
20. How much would it take to set me off? Not much.
21. My wife came home, she began to yell at me, “Clean this, and clean this, and how could this happen, and—and look at this!”
22. I ran out of the house like a crazy man,
23. I knocked a bag of groceries down the steps,
24. a trail of eggs followed me down the street. (!!!)

### Discourse Analysis

Even a cursory look at these two samples in the light of the four propositions given earlier show obvious and significant differences in the fabric of their discourse. A few that we may mention include:

*Syntactic autonomy:* Idea units in the Lieberman excerpt (L.) are far more likely to be framed linguistically in complete sentences. Twenty-three of the idea units clearly marked as what Chafe colorfully calls “spurts of language production” possess the formal arrangement of subject, verb, and object—an unheard-of level of syntactic autonomy for spoken oral discourse, but of course not at all unusual for written language. The May piece (M.), on the other hand, has only eleven units containing all the elements of a sentence. This is still a high proportion for spoken discourse, according to Chafe, but not when one considers that the performance context demands some elevation of autonomy: an audience, at least verbally, is not a full partner in the discourse.

*Intonational autonomy:* L. contains fifteen units that end in the intonational dip characteristic of a spoken period. M. contains ten. This difference is still significantly higher, but not as high as the discrepancy in syntactic autonomy. The nature of performance has apparently driven the teller to run several of his crafted sentences together intonationally, a discourse strategy that Chafe calls...

*Integration:* Nearly all of the units of discourse in M. are integrated—syntactically, intonationally, or both—with those before and after. Even units with all the syntactic elements of a sentence are preceded or followed by conjunctions (and, but, or, so). There are sixteen units linked before or behind by conjunctions in M. compared with six in L. (Strikingly, three of the six idea conjunctions in L. appear in reported dialogue [#21], which is the performed construction of oral discourse, clearly and precisely set off linguistically from the more literary language in which it is embedded.) This is a clear marker of the emergent, paratactic quality of oral, as opposed to written, speech. It is also a natural involvement strategy, born of holding onto a listener’s attention in the time-flow of performance, as opposed to the frozen, autonomous present of print.

*Imprecision and repetition:* M. is full of the kinds of linguistic markers (sort of, kind of, and so on, like, you know) that Chafe calls “fuzziness” (1982:48). Although these may look weak on the page to an eye used to the precision of print, Chafe actually numbers them with other involvement strategies of conversational discourse. He suggests that they

express “a desire for experiential involvement as opposed to the less humankind of precision which is fostered by writing” (*ibid.*). M. is also sprinkled with repetitions and hesitations that indicate the emergent language process in action. L., on the other hand, contains none of these conversational markers.

*Spontaneous side-comments and response units:* My transcription of M., as noted above, contains four non-verbal idea units. This is my own way of notating those beats in the performance in which the storyteller pauses to let the audience catch up with the implications of what has gone before, and anticipate what may be coming. Jim was dealing with the most volatile possible combination of ingredients for his committed Catholic audience—sex and spirituality—so there were major opportunities for this kind of telepathic conversation in his piece. Oral interpretive performers may be able to create these kinds of beats—but it takes a special effort to move away from the autonomous flow of language into the flow of non-verbal, imaginative conversation. Jim’s spontaneous comment to the audience, “I got away with that, you may not be able to stop me now!” (#17) is no more than a verbal eruption out of this flow of pleurably negotiated tensions.

*Open and closed elements in conversational storytelling:* This passage from Jim May’s storytelling, though conversational in tone and in the strategies of style, is far from random in construction. The conversationally indeterminate segments generally lead up to a phrase, a passage, or an image that is set, and that varies little or not at all from performance to performance. Such set units in this excerpt would include nos. 5, 15, 20, 22, and 24. I have heard the story performed many times, and these are always present, in the same order. They seem to me to be in the same words as well—but they may be more in the nature of oral-formulaic elements, which link and structure an improvisational chain. They are like proverbs, or the punch-lines of jokes, fixed nodes within a freer discursive web. More exploration is due into the ways in which these set beats function in contemporary orally-created storytelling discourse.

## **Conclusions and Inconclusions**

The work of contemporary storytellers offers a rich field for discourse analysis of subtle variations in oral traditional and oral interpretive performance. For now, these small excerpts will have to stand as tokens of the cultural and stylistic multivocality that expresses itself even

in one small garden patch of the contemporary storytelling scene. It is clear that this movement, with its interdisciplinary cross-currents and its complex artistic and cultural agenda, is not a revival of oral tradition in any simple sense; nor is it an uninflected valorization of literature in performance. It is a significant amalgamation of these modes that comes at a crucial evolutionary moment in our technologization of culture.

The storytelling movement represents to me a conscious and unconscious effort to heal the wounds that the orality/literacy split has left in the constitution of our multicultural society, even as the remaining oral cultures of the world are being absorbed at an unprecedented rate into the electronic global village. Although orality tends to get first billing in the rhetorical framing of a contemporary storytelling event, the literary element is neither slighted nor divided against its elder. But they are often invoked in common cause against the electronic media, which are framed as the usurpers, the Darth Vaders, the dragon that the storytelling revivalist has been summoned to slay.

This observation reminds me of Ong's reading of the *Phaedrus*, in which he catches Plato's Socrates arguing against writing in a dialectical discourse of which writing is the generative matrix (1982:80). Whether we consider the outdoor festivals and indoor concerts in which microphones, P. A. systems, and sound engineers conspire to create electronic analogues for conversational intimacy; or the audio and video cassette recorders and players that make it possible for us to study not just the texts of folktales but their performative dimensions as well; or when we open ourselves to the novelties of isolation created by modern urban society, by endless mobility and the temptations of rootlessness, by living in cells connected only by the pulsating glow of the tube, this permanent floating existential crisis in which orality, literacy, even identity as we have traditionally constituted it seem pale and uncertain and bled of meaning; and when we hear how insistently the storytelling movement positions itself as an answer to this isolation—from any angle except the most naive, the electronically processed world is the performative context of this revival. What it will grow into as we bypass the naivete of the first crusading decades and find that storytelling is no answer—only a heartfelt and powerful means of asking questions—and what questions we will ask about orality and literacy and performance and the world—is a story that remains to be told.

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