3
Some psychodynamics of orality

Sounded word as power and action

As a result of the work just reviewed, and of other work which will be cited, it is possible to generalize somewhat about the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures, that is, of oral cultures untouched by writing. For brevity, when the context keeps the meaning clear, I shall refer to primary oral cultures simply as oral cultures.

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing. Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back – 'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurences, events.

To learn what a primary oral culture is and what the nature of our problem is regarding such a culture, it helps first to reflect on the nature of sound itself as sound (Ong 1967b, pp. 111–38). All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special

relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone.

There is no way to stop sound and have sound. I can stop a moving picture camera and hold one frame fixed on the screen. If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing – only silence, no sound at all. All sensation takes place in time, but no other sensory field totally resists a holding action, stabilization, in quite this way. Vision can register motion, but it can also register immobility. Indeed, it favors immobility, for to examine something closely by vision, we prefer to have it quiet. We often reduce motion to a series of still shots the better to see what motion is. There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound. An oscillogram is silent. It lies outside the sound world.

For anyone who has a sense of what words are in a primary oral culture, or a culture not far removed from primary orality, it is not surprising that the Hebrew term *dabar* means 'word' and 'event'. Malinowski (1923, pp. 451, 470–81) has made the point that among 'primitive' (oral) peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought, though he had trouble explaining what he was getting at (Sampson 1980, pp. 223–6), since understanding of the psychodynamics of orality was virtually nonexistent in 1923. Neither is it surprising that oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic'.

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend

rather to be assimilated to things, 'out there' on a flat surface. Such 'things' are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection (Ong 1977, pp. 230–71).

Oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things. Explanations of Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20 usually call condescending attention to this presumably quaint archaic belief. Such a belief is in fact far less quaint than it seems to unreflective chirographic and typographic folk. First of all, names do give human beings power over what they name: without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand, for example, chemistry and to practice chemical engineering. And so with all other intellectual knowledge. Secondly, chirographic and typographic folk tend to think of names as labels, written or printed tags imaginatively affixed to an object named. Oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen. Written or printed representations of words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be.

You know what you can recall: mnemonics and formulas

In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes.

You know what you can recall. When we say we know Euclidean geometry, we mean not that we have in mind at the moment every one of its propositions and proofs but rather that we can bring them to mind readily. We can recall them. The theorem 'You know what you can recall' applies also to an oral culture. But how do persons in an oral culture recall? The organized knowledge that literates today study so that they 'know' it, that is, can recall it, has, with very few if any exceptions, been assembled and made available to them in writing. This is the case not only with Euclidean geometry but also with American Revolutionary history, or even baseball batting averages or traffic regulations.

An oral culture has no texts. How does it get together organized material for recall? This is the same as asking, 'What does it or can it know in an organized fashion?'

Suppose a person in an oral culture would undertake to think

through a particular complex problem and would finally manage to articulate a solution which itself is relatively complex, consisting, let us say, of a few hundred words. How does he or she retain for later recall the verbalization so painstakingly elaborated? In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. *Aides-mémoire* such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated series of assertions. How, in fact, could a lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.

But even with a listener to stimulate and ground your thought, the bits and pieces of your thought cannot be preserved in jotted notes. How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax (Havelock 1963, pp. 87–96, 131–2, 294–6).

Protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiologically. Jousse (1978) has shown the intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body in ancient Aramaic and Hellenic targums, and thus also in ancient Hebrew. Among the ancient Greeks, Hesiod, who was intermediate between oral Homeric Greece and fully developed Greek litera-

cy, delivered quasi-philosophic material in the formulaic verse forms that structured it into the oral culture from which he had emerged (Havelock 1963, pp. 97–8, 294–301).

Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all. 'Red in the morning, the sailor's warning; red in the night, the sailor's delight.' 'Divide and conquer.' 'To err is human, to forgive is divine.' 'Sorrow is better than laughter, because when the face is sad the heart grows wiser' (Ecclesiastes 7:3). 'The clinging vine.' 'The sturdy oak.' 'Chase off nature and she returns at a gallop.' Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be 'looked up' in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them.

The more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is likely to be marked by set expressions skillfully used. This is true of oral cultures generally from those of Homeric Greece to those of the present day across the globe. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) and fictional works such as Chinua Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* (1961), which draws directly on Ibo oral tradition in West Africa, alike provide abundant instances of thought patterns of orally educated characters who move in these oral, mnemonically tooled grooves, as the speakers reflect, with high intelligence and sophistication, on the situations in which they find themselves involved. The law itself in oral cultures is enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs, which are not mere jurisprudential decorations, but themselves constitute the law. A judge in an oral culture is often called on to articulate sets of relevant proverbs out of which he can produce equitable decisions in the cases under formal litigation before him (Ong 1978, p. 5).

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought, however

complex. Heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in chirographic cultures, but in doing so they of course determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized. In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically. This is one reason why, for a St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), as for other savants living in a culture that knew some literacy but still carried an overwhelmingly massive oral residue, memory bulks so large when he treats of the powers of the mind.

Of course, all expression and all thought is to a degree formulaic in the sense that every word and every concept conveyed in a word is a kind of formula, a fixed way of processing the data of experience, determining the way experience and reflection are intellectually organized, and acting as a mnemonic device of sorts. Putting experience into any words (which means transforming it at least a little bit – not the same as falsifying it) can implement its recall. The formulas characterizing orality are more elaborate, however, than are individual words, though some may be relatively simple: the *Beowulf*-poet's 'whale-road' is a formula (metaphorical) for the sea in a sense in which the term 'sea' is not.

Further characteristics of orally based thought and expression

Awareness of the mnemonic base of the thought and expression in primary oral cultures opens the way to understanding some further characteristics of orally based thought and expression in addition to its formulaic styling. The characteristics treated here are some of those which set off orally based thought and expression from chirographically and typographically based thought and expression, the characteristics, that is, which are most likely to strike those reared in writing and print cultures as surprising. This inventory of characteristics is not presented as exclusive or conclusive but as suggestive, for much more work and reflection is needed to deepen understanding of orally based thought (and thereby understanding of chirographically based, typographically based, and electronically based thought).

In a primary oral culture, thought and expression tend to be of the following sorts.

(i) *Additive rather than subordinative*

A familiar instance of additive oral style is the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–5, which is indeed a text but one preserving recognizable oral patterning. The Douay version (1610), produced in a culture with a still massive oral residue, keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original (as mediated through the Latin from which the Douay version was made):

> In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night; and there was evening and morning one day.

Nine introductory 'ands'. Adjusted to sensibilities shaped more by writing and print, the *New American Bible* (1970) translates:

> In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night'. Thus evening came, and morning followed – the first day.

Two introductory 'ands', each submerged in a compound sentence. The Douay renders the Hebrew *we* or *wa* ('and') simply as 'and'. The New American renders it 'and', 'when', 'then', 'thus', or 'while', to provide a flow of narration with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing (Chafe 1982) and that appears more natural in twentieth-century texts. Oral structures often look to pragmatics (the convenience of the speaker – Sherzer, 1974, reports lengthy public oral performances among the Cuna incomprehensible to their hearers). Chirographic structures look more to syntactics

(organization of the discourse itself), as Givón has suggested (1979). Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar.

It would be a mistake to think that the Douay is simply 'closer' to the original today than the New American is. It is closer in that it renders *we* or *wa* always by the same word, but it strikes the present-day sensibility as remote, archaic, and even quaint. Peoples in oral cultures or cultures with high oral residue, including the culture that produced the Bible, do not savor this sort of expression as so archaic or quaint. It feels natural and normal to them somewhat as the New American version feels natural and normal to us.

Other instances of additive structure can be found across the world in primary oral narrative, of which we now have a massive supply on tape (see Foley, 1980b, for listing of some tapes).

(ii) *Aggregative rather than analytic*

This characteristic is closely tied to reliance on formulas to implement memory. The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight (Ong 1977, pp. 188–212).

The clichés in political denunciations in many low-technology, developing cultures – enemy of the people, capitalist war-mongers – that strike high literates as mindless are residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes. One of the many indications of a high, if subsiding, oral residue in the culture of the Soviet Union is (or was a few years ago, when I

encountered it) the insistence on speaking there always of 'the Glorious Revolution of October 26' – the epithetic formula here is obligatory stabilization, as were Homeric epithetic formulas 'wise Nestor' or 'clever Odysseus', or as 'the glorious Fourth of July' used to be in the pockets of oral residue common even in the early twentieth-century United States. The Soviet Union still announces each year the official epithets for various *loci classici* in Soviet history.

An oral culture may well ask in a riddle why oaks are sturdy, but it does so to assure you that they are, to keep the aggregate intact, not really to question or cast doubt on the attribution. (For examples directly from the oral culture of the Luba in Zaire, see Faik-Nzuji 1970.) Traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them. So soldiers are brave and princesses beautiful and oaks sturdy forever. This is not to say that there may not be other epithets for soldiers or princesses or oaks, even contrary epithets, but these are standard, too: the braggart soldier, the unhappy princess, can also be part of the equipment. What obtains for epithets obtains for other formulas. Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. Without a writing system, breaking up thought – that is, analysis – is a high-risk procedure. As Lévi-Strauss has well put it in a summary statement 'the savage [i.e. oral] mind totalizes' (1966, p. 245).

(iii) *Redundant or 'copious'*

Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. Backlooping can be entirely occasional, purely *ad hoc*. The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence

the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track.

Since redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity. Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing. Eliminating redundancy on a significant scale demands a time-obviating technology, writing, which imposes some kind of strain on the psyche in preventing expression from falling into its more natural patterns. The psyche can manage the strain in part because handwriting is physically such a slow process – typically about one-tenth of the speed of oral speech (Chafe 1982). With writing, the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes.

Redundancy is also favored by the physical conditions of oral expression before a large audience, where redundancy is in fact more marked than in most face-to-face conversation. Not everyone in a large audience understands every word a speaker utters, if only because of acoustical problems. It is advantageous for the speaker to say the same thing, or equivalently the same thing, two or three times. If you miss the 'not only . . .' you can supply it by inference from the 'but also . . .'. Until electronic amplification reduced acoustical problems to a minimum, public speakers as late as, for example, William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) continued the old redundancy in their public addresses and by force of habit let them spill over into their writing. In some kinds of acoustic surrogates for oral verbal communication, redundancy reaches fantastic dimensions, as in African drum talk. It takes on the average around eight times as many words to say something on the drums as in the spoken language (Ong 1977, p. 101).

The public speaker's need to keep going while he is running through his mind what to say next also encourages redundancy. In oral delivery, though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling. Hence it is better to repeat something, artfully if possible, rather than simply to stop speaking while fishing for the next idea. Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness,

volubility. Rhetoricians were to call this *copia*. They continued to encourage it, by a kind of oversight, when they had modulated rhetoric from an art of public speaking to an art of writing. Early written texts, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are often bloated with 'amplification', annoyingly redundant by modern standards. Concern with *copia* remains intense in western culture so long as the culture sustains massive oral residue – which is roughly until the age of Romanticism or even beyond. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) is one of the many fulsome early Victorians whose pleonastic written compositions still read much as an exuberant, orally composed oration would sound, as do also, very often, the writings of Winston Churchill (1874–1965).

(iv) *Conservative or traditionalist*

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new.

Writing is of course conservative in its own ways. Shortly after it first appeared, it served to freeze legal codes in early Sumeria (Oppenheim 1964, p. 232). But by taking conservative functions on itself, the text frees the mind of conservative tasks, that is, of its memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself to new speculation (Havelock 1963, pp. 254–305). Indeed, the residual orality of a given chirographic culture can be calculated to a degree from the mnemonic load it leaves on the mind, that is, from the amount of memorization the culture's educational procedures require (Goody 1968a, pp. 13–14).

Of course oral cultures do not lack originality of their own kind. Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories

but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. But narrators also introduce new elements into old stories (Goody 1977, pp. 29–30). In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely. Praise poems of chiefs invite entrepreneurship, as the old formulas and themes have to be made to interact with new and often complicated political situations. But the formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials.

Religious practices, and with them cosmologies and deep-seated beliefs, also change in oral cultures. Disappointed with the practical results of the cult at a given shrine when cures there are infrequent, vigorous leaders – the 'intellectuals' in oral society, Goody styles them (1977, p. 30) – invent new shrines and with these new conceptual universes. Yet these new universes and the other changes that show a certain originality come into being in an essentially formulaic and thematic noetic economy. They are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors.

(v) *Close to the human lifeworld*

In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemizing such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in an abstract, neutral list entirely devoid of a human action context. An oral culture has no vehicle so neutral as a list. In the latter half of the second book, the *Iliad* presents the famous catalogue of the ships – over four hundred lines – which compiles the names of Grecian leaders and the regions they ruled, but in a total context of human action: the names of

persons and places occur as involved in doings (Havelock 1963, pp. 176–80). The normal and very likely the only place in Homeric Greece where this sort of political information could be found in verbalized form was in a narrative or a genealogy, which is not a neutral list but an account describing personal relations (cf. Goody and Watt 1968, p. 32). Oral cultures know few statistics or facts divorced from human or quasi-human activity.

An oral culture likewise has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades (such manuals in fact are extremely rare and always crude even in chirographic cultures, coming into effective existence only after print has been considerably interiorized – Ong 1967b, pp. 28–9, 234, 258). Trades were learned by apprenticeship (as they still largely are even in high-technology cultures), which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation. The maximum verbal articulation of such things as navigation procedures, which were crucial to Homeric culture, would have been encountered not in any abstract manual-style description at all but in such things as the following passage from the *Iliad* i. 141–4, where the abstract description is embedded in a narrative presenting specific commands for human action or accounts of specific acts:

> As for now a black ship let us draw to the great salt sea
> And therein oarsmen let us advisedly gather and thereupon a hecatomb
> Let us set and upon the deck Chryseis of fair cheeks
> Let us embark. And one man as captain, a man of counsel, there must be.

(quoted in Havelock 1963, p. 81; see also ibid., pp. 174–5). Primary oral culture is little concerned with preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus.

(vi) *Agonistically toned*

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle

with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one (Abrahams 1968; 1972). Bragging about one's own prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings of an opponent figure regularly in encounters between characters in narrative: in the *Iliad*, in *Beowulf*, throughout medieval European romance, in *The Mwindo Epic* and countless other African stories (Okpewho 1979; Obiechina 1975), in the Bible, as between David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:43–7). Standard in oral societies across the world, reciprocal name-calling has been fitted with a specific name in linguistics: flyting (or fliting). Growing up in a still dominantly oral culture, certain young black males in the United States, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, engage in what is known variously as the 'dozens' or 'joning' or 'sounding' or by other names, in which one opponent tries to outdo the other in vilifying the other's mother. The dozens is not a real fight but an art form, as are the other stylized verbal tongue lashings in other cultures.

Not only in the use to which knowledge is put, but also in the celebration of physical behavior, oral cultures reveal themselves as agonistically programmed. Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative. In the *Iliad*, for example, Books viii and x would at least rival the most sensational television and cinema shows today in outright violence and far surpass them in exquisitely gory detail, which can be less repulsive when described verbally than when presented visually. Portrayal of gross physical violence, central to much oral epic and other oral genres and residual through much early literacy, gradually wanes or becomes peripheral in later literary narrative. It survives in medieval ballads but is already being spoofed by Thomas Nashe in *The Unfortunate Traveler* (1594). As literary narrative moves toward the serious novel, it eventually pulls the focus of action more and more to interior crises and away from purely exterior crises.

The common and persistent physical hardships of life in many early societies of course explain in part the high evidence

of violence in early verbal art forms. Ignorance of physical causes of disease and disaster can also foster personal tensions. Since the disease or disaster is caused by something, in lieu of physical causes the personal malevolence of another human being – a magician, a witch – can be assumed and personal hostilities thereby increased. But violence in oral art forms is also connected with the structure of orality itself. When all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound, interpersonal relations are kept high – both attractions and, even more, antagonisms.

The other side of agonistic name-calling or vituperation in oral or residually oral cultures is the fulsome expression of praise which is found everywhere in connection with orality. It is well known in the much-studied present-day African oral praise poems (Finnegan 1970; Opland 1975) as all through the residually oral western rhetorical tradition stretching from classical antiquity through the eighteenth century. 'I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him', Marcus Antonius cries in his funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (v. ii. 79), and then proceeds to praise Caesar in rhetorical patterns of encomium which were drilled into the heads of all Renaissance schoolboys and which Erasmus used so wittily in his *Praise of Folly*. The fulsome praise in the old, residually oral, rhetoric tradition strikes persons from a high-literacy culture as insincere, flatulent, and comically pretentious. But praise goes with the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes.

The agonistic dynamics of oral thought processes and expression have been central to the development of western culture, where they were institutionalized by the 'art' of rhetoric, and by the related dialectic of Socrates and Plato, which furnished agonistic oral verbalization with a scientific base worked out with the help of writing. More will be said about this later.

(vii) *Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced*

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known (Have-

lock 1963, pp. 145–6), 'getting with it'. Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. The 'objectivity' which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual's reaction is not expressed as simply individual or 'subjective' but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal 'soul'. Under the influence of writing, despite his protest against it, Plato had excluded the poets from his Republic, for studying them was essentially learning to react with 'soul', to feel oneself identified with Achilles or Odysseus (Havelock 1963, pp. 197–233). Treating another primary oral setting over two thousand years later, the editors of *The Mwindo Epic* (1971, p. 37) call attention to a similar strong identification of Candi Rureke, the performer of the epic, and through him of his listeners, with the hero Mwindo, an identification which actually affects the grammar of the narration, so that on occasion the narrator slips into the first person when describing the actions of the hero. So bound together are narrator, audience, and character that Rureke has the epic character Mwindo himself address the scribes taking down Rureke's performance: 'Scribe, march!' or 'O scribe you, you see that I am already going.' In the sensibility of the narrator and his audience the hero of the oral performance assimilates into the oral world even the transcribers who are de-oralizing it into text.

(viii) *Homeostatic*

By contrast with literate societies, oral societies can be characterized as homeostatic (Goody and Watt 1968, pp. 31–4). That is to say, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.

The forces governing homeostasis can be sensed by reflection on the condition of words in a primary oral setting. Print cultures have invented dictionaries in which the various meanings of a word as it occurs in datable texts can be recorded in formal definitions. Words thus are known to have layers of meaning, many of them quite irrelevant to ordinary present meanings. Dictionaries advertise semantic discrepancies.

Oral cultures of course have no dictionaries and few semantic discrepancies. The meaning of each word is controlled by what Goody and Watt (1968, p. 29) call 'direct semantic ratification', that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. The oral mind is uninterested in definitions (Luria 1976, pp. 48–99). Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. Word meanings come continuously out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized.

It is true that oral art forms, such as epic, retain some words in archaic forms and senses. But they retain such words, too, through current use – not the current use of ordinary village discourse but the current use of ordinary epic poets, who preserve archaic forms in their special vocabulary. These performances are part of ordinary social life and so the archaic forms are current, though limited to poetic activity. Memory of the old meaning of old terms thus has some durability, but not unlimited durability.

When generations pass and the object or institution referred to by the archaic word is no longer part of present, lived experience, though the word has been retained, its meaning is commonly altered or simply vanishes. African talking drums, as used for example among the Lokele in eastern Zaire, speak in elaborate formulas that preserve certain archaic words which the Lokele drummers can vocalize but whose meaning they no longer know (Carrington 1974, pp. 41–2; Ong 1977, pp. 94–5). Whatever these words referred to has dropped out of Lokele daily experience, and the term that remains has become empty. Rhymes and games transmitted orally from one generation of small children to the next even in high-technology culture have similar words which have lost their original referential meanings and are in effect nonsense syllables. Many instances of such survival of empty terms can be found in Opie and Opie (1952), who, as literates, of course manage to recover and report the original meanings of the terms lost to their present oral users.

Goody and Watt (1968, pp. 31–3) cite Laura Bohannan,

Emrys Peters, and Godfrey and Monica Wilson for striking instances of the homeostasis of oral cultures in the handing on of genealogies. In recent years among the Tiv people of Nigeria the genealogies actually used orally in settling court disputes have been found to diverge considerably from the genealogies carefully recorded in writing by the British forty years earlier (because of their importance then, too, in court disputes). The later Tiv have maintained that they were using the same genealogies as forty years earlier and that the earlier written record was wrong. What had happened was that the later genealogies had been adjusted to the changed social relations among the Tiv: they were the same in that they functioned in the same way to regulate the real world. The integrity of the past was subordinate to the integrity of the present.

Goody and Watt (1968, p. 33) report an even more strikingly detailed case of 'structural amnesia' among the Gonja in Ghana. Written records made by the British at the turn of the twentieth century show that Gonja oral tradition then presented Ndewura Jakpa, the founder of the state of Gonja, as having had seven sons, each of whom was ruler of one of the seven territorial divisions of the state. By the time sixty years later when the myths of state were again recorded, two of the seven divisions had disappeared, one by assimilation to another division and the other by reason of a boundary shift. In these later myths, Ndewura Jakpa had five sons, and no mention was made of the two extinct divisions. The Gonja were still in contact with their past, tenacious about this contact in their myths, but the part of the past with no immediately discernible relevance to the present had simply fallen away. The present imposed its own economy on past remembrances. Packard (1980, p. 157) has noted that Claude Lévi-Strauss, T. O. Beidelman, Edmund Leach and others have suggested that oral traditions reflect a society's present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past. He finds this is true of the Bashu, as Harms (1980, p. 178) finds it also true of the Bobangi.

The implications here for oral genealogies need to be noted. A West African griot or other oral genealogist will recite those genealogies which his hearers listen to. If he knows genealogies which are no longer called for, they drop from his repertoire and eventually disappear. The genealogies of political winners are of

course more likely to survive than those of losers. Henige (1980, p. 255), reporting on Ganda and Myoro kinglists, notes that the 'oral mode . . . allows for inconvenient parts of the past to be forgotten' because of 'the exigencies of the continuing present'. Moreover, skilled oral narrators deliberately vary their traditional narratives because part of their skill is their ability to adjust to new audiences and new situations or simply to be coquettish. A West African griot employed by a princely family (Okpewho 1979, pp. 25–6, 247, n. 33; p. 248, n. 36) will adjust his recitation to compliment his employers. Oral cultures encourage triumphalism, which in modern times has regularly tended somewhat to disappear as once-oral societies become more and more literate.

(ix) *Situational rather than abstract*

All conceptual thinking is to a degree abstract. So 'concrete' a term as 'tree' does not refer simply to a singular 'concrete' tree but is an abstraction, drawn out of, away from, individual, sensible actuality; it refers to a concept which is neither this tree nor that tree but can apply to any tree. Each individual object that we style a tree is truly 'concrete', simply itself, not 'abstract' at all, but the term we apply to the individual object is in itself abstract. Nevertheless, if all conceptual thinking is thus to some degree abstract, some uses of concepts are more abstract than other uses.

Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld. There is a considerable literature bearing on this phenomenon. Havelock (1978a) has shown that pre-Socratic Greeks thought of justice in operational rather than formally conceptualized ways and the late Anne Amory Parry (1973) made much the same point about the epithet *amymōn* applied by Homer to Aegisthus: the epithet means not 'blameless', a tidy abstraction with which literates have translated the term, but 'beautiful-in-the-way-a-warrior-ready-to-fight-is-beautiful'.

No work on operational thinking is richer for the present purpose than A. R. Luria's *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* (1976). At the suggestion of the distinguished

Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, Luria did extensive fieldwork with illiterate (that is, oral) persons and somewhat literate persons in the remoter areas of Uzbekistan (the homeland of Avicenna) and Kirghizia in the Soviet Union during the years 1931–2. Luria's book was published in its original Russian edition only in 1974, forty-two years after his research was completed, and appeared in English translation two years later.

Luria's work provides more adequate insights into the operation of orally based thought than had the theories of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1923), who concluded that 'primitive' (in fact, orally based) thought was 'prelogical' and magical in the sense that it was based on belief systems rather than on practical actuality, or than had the proposals of Lévy-Bruhl's opponents such as Franz Boas (not George Boas, as erroneously in Luria 1976, p. 8), who maintained that primitive peoples thought as we do but used a different set of categories.

In an elaborate framework of Marxist theory, Luria attends to some degree to matters other than the immediate consequences of literacy, such as 'the unregulated individualistic economy centered on agriculture' and 'the beginnings of collectivization' (1976, p. 14), and he does not systematically encode his findings expressly in terms of oral-literacy differences. But despite the elaborate Marxist scaffolding, Luria's report clearly turns in fact on the differences between orality and literacy. He identifies the persons he interviews on a scale ranging from illiteracy to various levels of moderate literacy and his data fall clearly into the classes of orally based versus chirographically based noetic processes. The contrasts that show between illiterates (by far the larger number of his subjects) and literates as such are marked and certainly significant (often Luria notes this fact explicitly) and they show what work reported on and cited by Carothers (1959) also shows: it takes only a moderate degree of literacy to make a tremendous difference in thought processes.

Luria and his associates gathered data in the course of long conversations with subjects in the relaxed atmosphere of a tea house, introducing the questions for the survey itself informally, as something like riddles, with which the subjects were familiar. Thus every effort was made to adapt the questions to the subjects in their own milieu. The subjects were not leaders in

their societies, but there is every reason to suppose that they had a normal range of intelligence and were quite representative of the culture. Among Luria's findings the following may be noted as of special interest here.

(1) Illiterate (oral) subjects identified geometrical figures by assigning them the names of objects, never abstractly as circles, squares, etc. A circle would be called a plate, sieve, bucket, watch, or moon; a square would be called a mirror, door, house, apricot drying-board. Luria's subjects identified the designs as representations of real things they knew. They never dealt with abstract circles or squares but rather with concrete objects. Teachers' school students on the other hand, moderately literate, identified geometrical figures by categorical geometric names: circles, squares, triangles, and so on (1976, pp. 32–9). They had been trained to give school-room answers, not real-life responses.

(2) Subjects were presented with drawings of four objects, three belonging to one category and the fourth to another, and were asked to group together those that were similar or could be placed in one group or designated by one word. One series consisted of drawings of the objects *hammer, saw, log, hatchet.* Illiterate subjects consistently thought of the group not in categorical terms (three tools, the log not a tool) but in terms of practical situations – 'situational thinking' – without adverting at all to the classification 'tool' as applying to all but the log. If you are a workman with tools and see a log, you think of applying the tool to it, not of keeping the tool away from what it was made for – in some weird intellectual game. A 25-year-old illiterate peasant: 'They're all alike. The saw will saw the log and the hatchet will chop it into small pieces. If one of these has to go, I'd throw out the hatchet. It doesn't do as good a job as a saw' (1976, p. 56). Told that the hammer, saw, and hatchet are all tools, he discounts the categorical class and persists in situational thinking: 'Yes, but even if we have tools, we still need wood – otherwise we can't build anything' (ibid.). Asked why another person had rejected one item in another series of four that he felt all belonged together, he replied, 'Probably that kind of thinking runs in his blood'.

By contrast an 18-year-old who had studied at a village school for only two years, not only classified a similar series in

categorical terms but insisted on the correctness of the classification under attack (1976, p. 74). A barely literate worker, aged 56, mingled situational grouping and categorical grouping, though the latter predominated. Given the series *axe, hatchet, sickle* to complete from the series *saw, ear of grain, log*, he completed the series with the saw – 'They are all farming tools' – but then reconsidered and added about the grain, 'You could reap it with the sickle' (1976, p. 72). Abstract classification was not entirely satisfying.

At points in his discussions Luria undertook to teach illiterate subjects some principles of abstract classification. But their grasp was never firm, and when they actually returned to working out a problem for themselves, they would revert to situational rather than categorical thinking (1976, p. 67). They were convinced that thinking other than operational thinking, that is, categorical thinking, was not important, uninteresting, trivializing (1976, pp. 54–5). One recalls Malinowski's account (1923, p. 502) of how 'primitives' (oral peoples) have names for the fauna and flora that are useful in their lives but treat other things in the forest as unimportant generalized background: 'That is just "bush".' 'Merely a flying animal.'

(3) We know that formal logic is the invention of Greek culture after it had interiorized the technology of alphabetic writing, and so made a permanent part of its noetic resources the kind of thinking that alphabetic writing made possible. In the light of this knowledge, Luria's experiments with illiterates' reactions to formally syllogistic and inferential reasoning is particularly revealing. In brief, his illiterate subjects seemed not to operate with formal deductive procedures at all – which is not the same as to say that they could not think or that their thinking was not governed by logic, but only that they would not fit their thinking into pure logical forms, which they seem to have found uninteresting. Why should they be interesting? Syllogisms relate to thought, but in practical matters no one operates in formally stated syllogisms.

Precious metals do not rust. Gold is a precious metal. Does it rust or not? Typical responses to this query included: 'Do precious metals rust or not? Does gold rust or not?' (peasant, 18 years of age); 'Precious metal rusts. Precious gold rusts' (34-year-old illiterate peasant) (1976, p. 104). *In the Far North, where there is snow, all*

bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears? Here is a typical response, 'I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others. . . . Each locality has its own animals' (1976, pp. 108–9). You find what color bears are by looking at them. Who ever heard of reasoning out in practical life the color of a polar bear? Besides, how am I sure that you know for sure that all bears are white in a snowy country? When the syllogism is given to him a second time, a barely literate 45-year-old chairman of a collective farm manages 'To go by your words, they should all be white' (1976, p. 114). 'To go by your words' appears to indicate awareness of the formal intellectual structures. A little literacy goes a long way. On the other hand, the chairman's limited literacy leaves him more comfortable in the person-to-person human lifeworld than in a world of pure abstractions: 'To go by your words. . . .' It is your responsibility, not mine, if the answer comes out in such a fashion.

Referring to work by Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner in Liberia (1973), James Fernandez (1980) has pointed out that a syllogism is self-contained: its conclusions are derived from its premises only. He notes that persons not academically educated are not acquainted with this special ground rule but tend rather in their interpretation of given statements, in a syllogism as elsewhere, to go beyond the statements themselves, as one does normally in real-life situations or in riddles (common in all oral cultures). I would add the observation that the syllogism is thus like a text, fixed, boxed-off, isolated. This fact dramatizes the chirographic base of logic. The riddle belongs in the oral world. To solve a riddle, canniness is needed: one draws on knowledge, often deeply subconscious, beyond the words themselves in the riddle.

(4) In Luria's field work, requests for definitions of even the most concrete objects met with resistance. 'Try to explain to me what a tree is.' 'Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them', replied one illiterate peasant, aged 22 (1976, p. 86). Why define, when a real-life setting is infinitely more satisfactory than a definition? Basically, the peasant was right. There is no way to refute the world of primary orality. All you can do is walk away from it into literacy.

'How would you define a tree in two words?' 'In two words? Apple tree, elm, poplar.' 'Say you go to a place where there are no cars. What will you tell people [a car is]?' 'If I go, I'll tell them that buses have four legs, chairs in front for people to sit on, a roof for shade and an engine. But when you get right down to it, I'd say: "If you get in a car and go for a drive, you'll find out."' The respondent enumerates some features but turns back ultimately to personal, situational experience (1976, p. 87).

By contrast, a literate collective-farm worker, aged 30: 'It's made in a factory. In one trip it can cover the distance it would take a horse ten days to make – it moves that fast. It uses fire and steam. We first have to set the fire going so the water gets steaming hot – the steam gives the machine its power. . . . I don't know whether there is water in a car, must be. But water isn't enough, it also needs fire' (1976, p. 90). Although he was not well informed, he did make an attempt to define a car. His definition, however, is not a sharp-focused description of visual appearance – this kind of description is beyond the capacity of the oral mind – but a definition in terms of its operations.

(5) Luria's illiterates had difficulty in articulate self-analysis. Self-analysis requires a certain demolition of situational thinking. It calls for isolation of the self, around which the entire lived world swirls for each individual person, removal of the center of every situation from that situation enough to allow the center, the self, to be examined and described. Luria put his questions only after protracted conversation about people's characteristics and their individual differences (1976, p. 148). A 38-year-old man, illiterate, from a mountain pasture camp was asked (1976, p. 150), 'What sort of person are you, what's your character like, what are your good qualities and shortcomings? How would you describe yourself?' 'I came here from Uch-Kurgan, I was very poor, and now I'm married and have children.' 'Are you satisfied with yourself or would you like to be different?' 'It would be good if I had a little more land and could sow some wheat.' Externals command attention. 'And what are your shortcomings?' 'This year I sowed one pood of wheat, and we're gradually fixing the shortcomings.' More external situations. 'Well, people are different – calm, hot-tempered, or sometimes their memory is poor. What do you think of yourself?'

'We behave well – if we were bad people, no one would respect us' (1976, p. 15). Self-evaluation modulated into group evaluation ('we') and then handled in terms of expected reactions from others. Another man, a peasant aged 36, asked what sort of person he was, responded with touching and humane directness: 'What can I say about my own heart? How can I talk about my character? Ask others; they can tell you about me. I myself can't say anything.' Judgement bears in on the individual from outside, not from within.

These are a few samples from Luria's many, but they are typical. One could argue that responses were not optimal because the respondents were not used to being asked these kinds of questions, no matter how cleverly Luria could work them into riddle-like settings. But lack of familiarity is precisely the point: an oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought. Luria's questions are schoolroom questions associated with the use of texts, and indeed closely resemble or are identical with standard intelligence test questions got up by literates. They are legitimate, but they come from a world the oral respondent does not share.

The subject's reactions suggest that it is perhaps impossible to devise a test in writing or even an oral test shaped in a literate setting that would assess accurately the native intellectual abilities of persons from a highly oral culture. Gladwin (1970, p. 219) notes that the Pulawat Islanders in the South Pacific respect their navigators, who have to be highly intelligent for their complex and demanding skill, not because they consider them 'intelligent' but quite simply because they are good navigators. Asked what he thought of a new village school principal, a Central African responded to Carrington (1974, p. 61), 'Let's watch a little how he dances'. Oral folk assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes but as situated in operational contexts.

Plying students or anyone else with analytic questions of this sort appears at a very late stage of textuality. Such questions are in fact missing not only from oral cultures, but also from writing

cultures. Written examination questions came into general use (in the west) only well after print had worked its effects on consciousness, thousands of years after the invention of writing. Classical Latin has no word for an 'examination' such as we 'take' today and try to 'pass' in school. Until the past few generations in the west, and still in perhaps most of the world today, academic practice has demanded that students in class 'recite', that is, feed back orally to the teacher statements (formulas – the oral heritage) that they had memorized from classroom instruction or from textbooks (Ong 1967b, pp. 53–76).

Proponents of intelligence tests need to recognize that our ordinary intelligence test questions are tailored to a special kind of consciousness, one deeply conditioned by literacy and print, 'modern consciousness' (Berger 1978). A highly intelligent person from an oral or residually oral culture might be expected normally to react to Luria's type of question, as many of his respondents clearly did, not by answering the seemingly mindless question itself but by trying to assess the total puzzling context (the oral mind totalizes): What is he asking me this stupid question for? What is he trying to do? (See also Ong 1978, p. 4). 'What is a tree?' Does he really expect me to respond to that when he and everyone else has seen thousands of trees? Riddles I can work with. But this is no riddle. Is it a game? Of course it is a game, but the oral person is unfamiliar with the rules. The people who ask such questions have been living in a barrage of such questions from infancy and are not aware that they are using special rules.

In a society with some literacy, such as that of Luria's subjects, illiterates can and often do of course have experience of literately organized thinking on the part of others. They will, for example, have heard someone read written compositions or have heard conversations such as only literates can engage in. One value of Luria's work is that it shows that such passing acquaintanceship with literate organization of knowledge has, at least so far as his cases show, no discernible effect on illiterates. Writing has to be personally interiorized to affect thinking processes.

Persons who have interiorized writing not only write but also speak literately, which is to say that they organize, to varying

degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write. Because it does not follow these patterns, literates have considered oral organization of thought naive. Oral thinking, however, can be quite sophisticated and in its own way reflective. Navaho narrators of Navaho folkloric animal stories can provide elaborate explanations of the various implications of the stories for an understanding of complex matters in human life from the physiological to the psychological and moral, and are perfectly aware of such things as physical inconsistencies (for example, coyotes with amber balls for eyes) and the need to interpret elements in the stories symbolically (Toelken 1976, p. 156). To assume that oral peoples are essentially unintelligent, that their mental processes are 'crude', is the kind of thinking that for centuries brought scholars to assume falsely that because the Homeric poems are so skillful, they must be basically written compositions.

Nor must we imagine that orally based thought is 'prelogical' or 'illogical' in any simplistic sense – such as, for example, in the sense that oral folk do not understand causal relationships. They know very well that if you push hard on a mobile object, the push causes it to move. What is true is that they cannot organize elaborate concatenations of causes in the analytic kind of linear sequences which can only be set up with the help of texts. The lengthy sequences they produce, such as genealogies, are not analytic but aggregative. But oral cultures can produce amazingly complex and intelligent and beautiful organizations of thought and experience. To understand how they do so, it will be necessary to discuss some of the operations of oral memory.

Oral memorization

Verbal memory skill is understandably a valued asset in oral cultures. But the way verbal memory works in oral art forms is quite different from what literates in the past commonly imagined. In a literate culture verbatim memorization is commonly done from a text, to which the memorizer returns as often as necessary to perfect and test verbatim mastery. In the past, literates have commonly assumed that oral memorization in an oral culture normally achieved the same goal of absolutely

verbatim repetition. How such repetition could be verified before sound recordings were known was unclear, since in the absence of writing the only way to test for verbatim repetition of lengthy passages would be the simultaneous recitation of the passages by two or more persons together. Successive recitations could not be checked against each other. But instances of simultaneous recitation in oral cultures were hardly sought for. Literates were happy simply to assume that the prodigious oral memory functioned somehow according to their own verbatim textual model.

In assessing more realistically the nature of verbal memory in primary oral cultures, the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord again proved revolutionary. Parry's work with the Homeric poems focused the issue. Parry demonstrated that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were basically oral creations, whatever circumstances governed their commitment to writing. At first blush, this discovery would seem to have confirmed the assumption of verbatim memorization. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were strictly metrical. How could a singer produce on demand a narrative consisting of thousands of dactylic hexameter lines unless he had them memorized word for word? Literates who can recite lengthy metrical works on demand have memorized them verbatim from texts. Parry (1928, in Parry 1971), however, laid the grounds for a new approach that could account for such production very well without verbatim memorization. As has been seen in Chapter 2, he showed that the hexameters were made up not simply of word-units but of formulas, groups of words for dealing with traditional materials, each formula shaped to fit into a hexameter line. The poet had a massive vocabulary of hexameterized phrases. With his hexameterized vocabulary, he could fabricate correct metrical lines without end, so long as he was dealing with traditional materials.

Thus in the Homeric poems, for Odysseus and Hector and Athena and Apollo and the other characters the poet had epithets and verbs which would fit them into the meter neatly when, for example, any one of them had to be announced as saying something. *Metephē polymētis Odysseus* (there spoke up clever Odysseus) or *prosephē polymētis Odysseus* (there spoke out clever Odysseus) occurs 72 times in the poems (Milman Parry 1971, p. 51). Odysseus is *polymētis* (clever) not just because he is

this kind of character but also because without the epithet *polymētis* he could not be readily worked into the meter. As earlier noted, the appositeness of these and other Homeric epithets has been piously exaggerated. The poet had thousands of other similarly functioning metrical formulas that could fit into his varying metrical needs almost any situation, person, thing, or action. Indeed, most words in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* occur as parts of identifiable formulas.

Parry's work showed that metrically tailored formulas controlled the composition of the ancient Greek epic and that the formulas could be shifted around quite handily without interfering with the story line or the tone of the epic. Did oral singers actually shift the formulas, so that individual metrically regular renditions of the same story differed in wording? Or was the story mastered verbatim, so that it was rendered the same way at every performance? Since pretextual Homeric poets had all been dead for well over two thousand years, they could not be taped for direct evidence. But direct evidence was available from living narrative poets in modern Yugoslavia, a country adjacent to and in part overlapping ancient Greece. Parry found such poets composing oral epic narrative, for which there was no text. Their narrative poems, like Homer's, were metric and formulaic, although their verse meter happened to be a different one from the ancient Greek dactylic hexameter. Lord continued and extended Parry's work, building up the massive collection of oral recordings of present-day Yugoslav narrative poets now in the Parry Collection at Harvard University.

Most of these living South Slavic narrative poets – and indeed all of the better ones – are illiterate. Learning to read and write disables the oral poet, Lord found: it introduces into his mind the concept of a text as controlling the narrative and thereby interferes with the oral composing processes, which have nothing to do with texts but are 'the remembrance of songs sung' (Peabody 1975, p. 216).

Oral poets' memory of songs sung is agile: it was 'not unusual' to find a Yugoslav bard singing 'from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute' (Lord 1960, p. 17). Comparison of the recorded songs, however, reveals that, though metrically regular, they were never sung the same way twice. Basically the same formulas and themes recurred, but they were stitched together or

'rhapsodized' differently in each rendition even by the same poet, depending on audience reaction, the mood of the poet or of the occasion, and other social and psychological factors.

Orally recorded interviews with the twentieth-century bards supplemented records of their performances. From these interviews, and from direct observation, we know how the bards learn: by listening for months and years to other bards who never sing a narrative the same way twice but who use over and over again the standard formulas in connection with the standard themes. Formulas are of course somewhat variable, as are themes, and a given poet's rhapsodizing or 'stitching together' of narratives will differ recognizably from another's. Certain turns of phrases will be idiosyncratic. But essentially, the materials, themes and formulas, and their use belong in a clearly identifiable tradition. Originality consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience.

The memory feats of these oral bards are remarkable, but they are unlike those associated with memorization of texts. Literates are usually surprised to learn that the bard planning to retell the story he has heard only once wants often to wait a day or so after he had heard the story before he himself repeats it. In memorizing a written text, postponing its recitation generally weakens recall. An oral poet is not working with texts or in a textual framework. He needs time to let the story sink into his own store of themes and formulas, time to 'get with' the story. In recalling and retelling the story, he has not in any literate sense 'memorized' its metrical rendition from the version of the other singer – a version long gone forever when the new singer is mulling over the story for his own rendition (Lord 1960, pp. 20–9). The fixed materials in the bard's memory are a float of themes and formulas out of which all stories are variously built.

One of the most telling discoveries in Lord's work has been that, although singers are aware that two different singers never sing the same song exactly alike, nevertheless a singer will protest that he can do his own version of a song line for line and word for word any time, and indeed, 'just the same twenty years from now' (Lord 1960, p. 27). When, however, their purported

verbatim renditions are recorded and compared, they turn out to be never the same, though the songs are recognizable versions of the same story. 'Word for word and line for line', as Lord interprets (1960, p. 28), is simply an emphatic way of saying 'like'. 'Line' is obviously a text-based concept, and even the concept of a 'word' as a discrete entity apart from a flow of speech seems somewhat text-based. Goody (1977, p. 115) has pointed out that an entirely oral language which has a term for speech in general, or for a rhythmic unit of a song, or for an utterance, or for a theme, may have no ready term for a 'word' as an isolated item, a 'bit' of speech, as in, 'The last sentence here consists of twenty-six words'. Or does it? Maybe there are twenty-eight. If you cannot write, is 'text-based' one word or two? The sense of individual words as significantly discrete items is fostered by writing, which, here as elsewhere, is diaeretic, separative. (Early manuscripts tend not to separate words clearly from each other, but to run them together.)

Significantly, illiterate singers in the widely literate culture of modern Yugoslavia develop and express attitudes toward writing (Lord 1960, p. 28). They admire literacy and believe that a literate person can do even better what they do, namely, recreate a lengthy song after hearing it only once. This is precisely what literates cannot do, or can do only with difficulty. As literates attribute literate kinds of achievement to oral performers, so oral performers attribute oral kinds of achievement to literates.

Lord early showed (1960) the applicability of oral-formulaic analysis to Old English (*Beowulf*) and others have shown various ways in which oral-formulaic methods help explain oral or residually oral composition in the European Middle Ages, in German, French, Portuguese, and other languages (see Foley 1980b). Fieldwork across the globe has corroborated and extended the work done by Parry and, far more extensively, by Lord in Yugoslavia. For example, Goody (1977, pp. 118–19) reports how, among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, where the Invocation to the Bagre, like the Lord's Prayer among Christians, is 'something everyone "knows"', the renditions of the invocation are nevertheless by no means stable. The Invocation consists of only 'a dozen lines or so', and, if you know the language, as Goody does, and pronounce the opening phrase of

the Invocation, your hearer may take up the refrain, correcting any mistakes he or she finds you making. However, taping shows that the wording of the Invocation can vary significantly from one recitation to the other, even in the case of recitations by the same individual, and even in individuals who will correct you when your version does not correspond to their (current) version.

Goody's findings here, and the findings of others (Opland 1975; 1976), make it clear that oral peoples at times do try for verbatim repetition of poems or other oral art forms. What is their success? Most often it is minimal by literate standards. From South Africa Opland (1976, p. 114) reports earnest efforts at verbatim repetition and the results: 'Any poet in the community will repeat the poem which is in my limited testing at least sixty per cent in correlation with other versions.' Success hardly matches ambition here. Sixty per cent accuracy in memorization would earn a pretty low mark in schoolroom recitation of a text or in an actor's rendition of a play's script.

Many instances of 'memorization' of oral poetry adduced as evidence of 'prior composition' by the poet, such as the instances in Finnegan (1977, pp. 76–82), seem to be of no greater verbatim accuracy. In fact, Finnegan claims only 'close similarity, in places amounting to word-for-word repetition' (1977, p. 76) and 'much more verbal and line-for-line repetition than one might expect from the Yugoslav analogy' (1977, p. 78; on the value of these comparisons and the ambiguous significance of 'oral poetry' in Finnegan, see Foley 1979).

Recent work, however, has brought to light some instances of more exact verbatim memorization among oral peoples. One is an instance of ritual verbalization among the Cuna, off the Panama coast, reported by Joel Sherzer (1982). In 1970 Sherzer had taped a lengthy magic puberty rite formula being taught by a man who was a girls' puberty rite specialist to other such specialists. He returned in 1979 with a transcription he had made of the formula and found that the same man could match the transcription verbatim, phoneme for phoneme. Although Sherzer does not state how widespread or durable the exact verbatim formula in question was within any given group of formula experts over a period of time, the instance he gives is a clear-cut one of success with verbatim reproduction. (The

instances referred to by Sherzer 1982, n. 3, from Finnegan 1977, as already indicated here above, all appear ambiguous, at best, and thus not equatable with his own instance.)

Two other instances comparable to Sherzer's show verbatim reproduction of oral materials fostered not by a ritualized setting but by special linguistic or musical constraints. One is from Somali classical poetry, which has a scansion pattern seemingly more complex and rigid than that of ancient Greek epic, so that the language cannot be varied so readily. John William Johnson notes that the Somali oral poets 'learn the rules of prosody in a manner very similar, if not identical to the way they learn grammar itself' (1979b, p. 118; see also Johnson 1979a). They can no more state what the metrical rules are than they can state the rules of Somali grammar. The Somali poets do not normally compose and perform at the same time, but work out a composition in private, word-for-word, which they afterwards recite in public themselves or pass on to another to recite. This again is a clear instance of oral verbatim memorization. How stable the verbalization is over any period of time (several years, a decade or so) apparently remains to be investigated.

The second instance shows how music may act as a constraint to fix a verbatim oral narrative. Drawing on his own intensive fieldwork in Japan, Eric Rutledge (1981) reports on a still extant, but vestigial, Japanese tradition, in which an oral narrative, *The Tale of the Heike*, is chanted to music, with some few 'white voice' sections unaccompanied instrumentally and some purely instrumental interludes. The narrative and musical accompaniment are memorized by apprentices, who begin as young children working with an oral master. The masters (there are not many left) undertake to train their apprentices in verbatim recitation of the chant through rigorous drill over several years, and succeed remarkably, though they themselves make changes in their own recitations of which they are unaware. Certain movements in the narrative are more error-prone than others. At some points the music stabilizes the text completely, but at others it generates errors of the same sorts found in manuscript copying, such as those produced by homoioteleuton – a copyist (or oral performer) skips from one occurrence of a concluding phrase to a later occurrence of the same concluding phrase, leaving out the intervening material.

Again, we have here cultivated verbatim rendition of a sort, less than totally invariable, but noteworthy.

Although in these instances the production of oral poetry or other oral verbalization by consciously cultivated memorization is not the same as the oral-formulaic practice in Homeric Greece or modern Yugoslavia or in countless other traditions, verbatim memorization apparently does not at all free the oral noetic processes from dependence on formulas, but if anything increases the dependence. In the case of Somali oral poetry, Francesco Antinucci has shown that this poetry has not merely phonological, metrical constraints, but also syntactic constraints. That is to say, only certain specific syntactic structures occur in the lines of the poems: in instances Antinucci presents, only two types of syntactic structures out of the hundreds possible (1979, p. 148). This is certainly formulaic composition with a vengeance, for formulas are nothing if not 'constraints' and here we are dealing with syntactic formulas (which are also found in the economy of the poems that Parry and Lord worked with). Rutledge (1981) notes the formulaic character of the material in the Heike chants, which indeed are so formulary as to contain many archaic words the meanings of which the masters do not even know. Sherzer (1982) also calls specific attention to the fact that the utterances he finds recited verbatim are made up of formulaic elements similar to those in oral performances of the ordinary, rhapsodic, nonverbatim type. He suggests that we think of a continuum between the 'fixed' and the 'flexible' use of formulaic elements. Sometimes formulaic elements are managed in an effort to establish verbatim sameness, sometimes they work to implement a certain adaptability or variation (though users of the formulaic elements, as Lord has shown, may generally think of what is in fact 'flexible' or variable use as being 'fixed' use). Sherzer's suggestion certainly is a wise suggestion.

Oral memorization deserves more and closer study, especially in ritual. Sherzer's verbatim instances are from ritual, and Rutledge hints in his paper and states explicitly in a letter to me (22 January 1982) that the Heike chants are ritualistic in setting. Chafe (1982), treating specifically the Seneca language, suggests that ritual language as compared to colloquial language is like writing in that it 'has a permanence which collo-

quial language does not. The same oral ritual is presented again and again: not verbatim, to be sure, but with a content, style, and formulaic structure which remain constant from performance to performance'. There can be little doubt, all in all, that in oral cultures generally, by far most of the oral recitation falls toward the flexible end of the continuum, and even in ritual. Even in cultures which know and depend on writing but retain a living contact with pristine orality, that is, retain a high oral residue, ritual utterance itself is often not typically verbatim. 'Do this in memory of me' Jesus said at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19). Christians celebrate the Eucharist as their central act of worship because of Jesus' directive. But the crucial words that Christians repeat as Jesus' words in fulfilling this directive (that is, the words 'This is my body . . . ; this is the cup of my blood . . .') do not appear in exactly the same way in any two places where they are cited in the New Testament. The early Christian Church remembered, in pretextual, oral form, even in her textualized rituals, and even at those very points where she was commanded to remember most assiduously.

Statements are often made about verbatim oral memorization of the Vedic hymns in India, presumably in complete independence of any texts. Such statements, so far as I know, have never been assessed in view of the findings of Parry and Lord and related findings concerning oral 'memorization'. The Vedas are lengthy collections and old, probably composed between 1500 and 900 or 500 BC – the variance that must be allowed in possible dates shows how vague are present-day contacts with the original settings in which grew the hymns, prayers, and liturgical formulas that make up these collections. Typical references still cited today to attest to verbatim memorization of the Vedas are from 1906 or 1927 (Kiparsky 1976, pp. 99–100), before any of Parry's work was completed, or from 1954 (Bright 1981), before Lord's (1960) and Havelock's work (1963). In *The Destiny of the Veda in India* (1965) the distinguished French Indologist and translator of the Rig-Veda Louis Renou does not even advert to the kinds of questions that arise in the wake of Parry's work.

There is no doubt that oral transmission was important in the history of the Vedas (Renou 1965, pp. 25–6 – #26 – and notes, pp. 83–4). Brahman teachers or gurus and their students

devoted intensive effort to verbatim memorization, even criss-crossing the words in various patterns to ensure oral mastery of their positions in relation to one another (Basham 1963, p. 164), though whether this latter pattern was used before a text had been developed appears an insoluble problem. In the wake of the recent studies of oral memory, however, questions arise as to the ways in which memory of the Vedas actually worked in a purely oral setting – if there ever was such a setting for the Vedas totally independent of texts. Without a text, how could a given hymn – not to mention the totality of hymns in the collections – be stabilized word for word, and that over many generations? Statements, made in good conscience by oral persons, that renditions are word for word the same, as we have seen, can be quite contrary to fact. Mere assertions, frequently made by literates, that such lengthy texts were retained verbatim over generations in a totally oral society can no longer be taken at face value without verification. What was retained? The first recitation of a poem by its originator? How could the originator ever repeat it word for word the second time and be sure he had done so? A version which a powerful teacher worked up? This appears a possibility. But his working it up in his own version shows variability in the tradition, and suggests that in the mouth of another powerful teacher more variations might well come in, wittingly or unwittingly.

In point of fact, the Vedic texts – on which we base knowledge of the Vedas today – have a complex history and many variants, facts which seem to suggest that they hardly originated from an absolutely verbatim oral tradition. Indeed, the formulaic and thematic structure of the Vedas, conspicuous even in translations, relates them to other oral performances we know, and indicates that they warrant further study in connection with what has been discovered recently about formulaic elements, thematic elements, and oral mnemonics. Peabody's work (1975) already directly encourages such study in his examination of relations between the older Indo-European tradition and Greek versification. For example, the incidence of high redundancy or its lack in the Vedas could itself be an indication of the degree to which they are of more or less oral provenience (see Peabody 1975, p. 173).

In all cases, verbatim or not, oral memorization is subject to

variation from direct social pressures. Narrators narrate what audiences call for or will tolerate. When the market for a printed book declines, the presses stop rolling but thousands of copies may remain. When the market for an oral genealogy disappears, so does the genealogy itself, utterly. As noted above (pp. 48–9), the genealogies of winners tend to survive (and to be improved), those of losers tend to vanish (or to be recast). Interaction with living audiences can actively interfere with verbal stability: audience expectations can help fix themes and formulas. I had such expectations enforced on me a few years ago by a niece of mine, still a tiny child young enough to preserve a clearly oral mindset (though one infiltrated by the literacy around her). I was telling her the story of 'The Three Little Pigs': 'He huffed and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed'. Cathy bridled at the formula I used. She knew the story, and my formula was not what she expected. 'He huffed and he puffed, and he *puffed* and he *huffed*, and he huffed and he puffed', she pouted. I reworded the narrative, complying to audience demand for what had been said before, as other oral narrators have often done.

Finally, it should be noted that oral memory differs significantly from textual memory in that oral memory has a high somatic component. Peabody (1975, p. 197) has observed that 'From all over the world and from all periods of time . . . traditional composition has been associated with hand activity. The aborigines of Australia and other areas often make string figures together with their songs. Other peoples manipulate beads on strings. Most descriptions of bards include stringed instruments or drums'. (See also Lord 1960; Havelock 1978a, pp. 220–2; Biebuyck and Mateene 1971, frontispiece.) To these instances one can add other examples of hand activity, such as gesturing, often elaborate and stylized (Scheub 1977), and other bodily activities such as rocking back and forth or dancing. The Talmud, though a text, is still vocalized by highly oral Orthodox Jews in Israel with a forward-and-backward rocking of the torso, as I myself have witnessed.

The oral word, as we have noted, never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is

not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable. In oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture.

Verbomotor lifestyle

Much in the foregoing account of orality can be used to identify what can be called 'verbomotor' cultures, that is, cultures in which, by contrast with high-technology cultures, courses of action and attitudes toward issues depend significantly more on effective use of words, and thus on human interaction, and significantly less on non-verbal, often largely visual input from the 'objective' world of things. Jousse (1925) used his term *verbomoteur* to refer chiefly to ancient Hebrew and Aramaic cultures and surrounding cultures, which knew some writing but remained basically oral and word-oriented in lifestyle rather than object-oriented. We are expanding its use here to include all cultures that retain enough oral residue to remain significantly word-attentive in a person-interactive context (the oral type of context) rather than object-attentive. It should, of course, be noted that words and objects are never totally disjunct: words represent objects, and perception of objects is in part conditioned by the store of words into which perceptions are nested. Nature states no 'facts': these come only within statements devised by human beings to refer to the seamless web of actuality around them.

The cultures which we are here styling verbomotor are likely to strike technological man as making all too much of speech itself, as overvaluing and certainly overpracticing rhetoric. In primary oral cultures, even business is not business: it is fundamentally rhetoric. Purchasing something at a Middle East souk or bazaar is not a simple economic transaction, as it would be at Woolworth's and as a high-technology culture is likely to presume it would be in the nature of things. Rather, it is a series of verbal (and somatic) maneuvers, a polite duel, a contest of wits, an operation in oral agonistic.

In oral cultures a request for information is commonly interpreted interactively (Malinowski 1923, pp. 451, 470–81), as agonistic, and, instead of being really answered, is frequently

parried. An illuminating story is told of a visitor in County Cork, Ireland, an especially oral region in a country which in every region preserves massive residual orality. The visitor saw a Corkman leaning against the post office. He went up to him, pounded with his hand on the post office wall next to the Corkman's shoulder, and asked, 'Is this the post office?' The Corkman was not taken in. He looked at his questioner quietly and with great concern: ''Twouldn't be a postage stamp you were lookin' for, would it?' He treated the enquiry not as a request for information but as something the enquirer was doing to him. So he did something in turn to the enquirer to see what would happen. All natives of Cork, according to the mythology, treat all questions this way. Always answer a question by asking another. Never let down your oral guard.

Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself. A teacher speaking to a class which he feels and which feels itself as a close-knit group, finds that if the class is asked to pick up its textbooks and read a given passage, the unity of the group vanishes as each person enters into his or her private lifeworld. An example of the contrast between orality and literacy on these grounds is found in Carother's report (1959) of evidence that oral peoples commonly externalize schizoid behavior where literates interiorize it. Literates often manifest tendencies (loss of contact with environment) by psychic withdrawal into a dreamworld of their own (schizophrenic delusional systematization), oral folk commonly manifest their schizoid tendencies by extreme external confusion, leading often to violent action, including mutilation of the self and of others. This behavior is frequent enough to have given rise to special terms to designate it: the old-time Scandinavian warrior going 'berserk', the Southeast Asian person running 'amok'.

The noetic role of heroic 'heavy' figures and of the bizarre

The heroic tradition of primary oral culture and of early literate culture, with its massive oral residue, relates to the agonistic

lifestyle, but it is best and most radically explained in terms of the needs of oral noetic processes. Oral memory works effectively with 'heavy' characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public. Thus the noetic economy of its nature generates outsize figures, that is, heroic figures, not for romantic reasons or reflectively didactic reasons but for much more basic reasons: to organize experience in some sort of permanently memorable form. Colorless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics. To assure weight and memorability, heroic figures tend to be type figures: wise Nestor, furious Achilles, clever Odysseus, omnicompetent Mwindo ('Little-One-Just-Born-He-Walked', Kábútwa-kénda, his common epithet). The same mnemonic or noetic economy enforces itself still where oral settings persist in literate cultures, as in the telling of fairy stories to children: the overpoweringly innocent Little Red Riding Hood, the unfathomably wicked wolf, the incredibly tall beanstalk that Jack has to climb – for non-human figures acquire heroic dimensions, too. Bizarre figures here add another mnemonic aid: it is easier to remember the Cyclops than a two-eyed monster, or Cerberus than an ordinary one-headed dog (see Yates 1966, pp. 9–11, 65–7). Formulary number groupings are likewise mnemonically helpful: the Seven Against Thebes, the Three Graces, the Three Fates, and so on. All this is not to deny that other forces besides mere mnemonic serviceability produce heroic figures and groupings. Psychoanalytic theory can explain a great many of these forces. But in an oral noetic economy, mnemonic serviceability is a *sine qua non*, and, no matter what the other forces, without proper mnemonic shaping of verbalization the figures will not survive.

As writing and eventually print gradually alter the old oral noetic structures, narrative builds less and less on 'heavy' figures until, some three centuries after print, it can move comfortably in the ordinary human lifeworld typical of the novel. Here, in place of the hero, one eventually encounters even the antihero, who, instead of facing up to the foe, constantly turns tail and runs away, as the protagonist in John Updike's *Rabbit Run*. The heroic and marvelous had served a specific function in organizing knowledge in an oral world. With the control of information and memory brought about by writing

and, more intensely, by print, you do not need a hero in the old sense to mobilize knowledge in story form. The situation has nothing to do with a putative 'loss of ideals'.

The interiority of sound

In treating some psychodynamics of orality, we have thus far attended chiefly to one characteristic of sound itself, its evanescence, its relationship to time. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. Other characteristics of sound also determine or influence oral psychodynamics. The principal one of these other characteristics is the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the senses. This relationship is important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself. It can be discussed only summarily here. I have treated the matter in greater fullness and depth in *The Presence of the Word*, to which the interested reader is referred (1967b, Index).

To test the physical interior of an object as interior, no sense works so directly as sound. The human sense of sight is adapted best to light diffusely reflected from surfaces. (Diffuse reflection, as from a printed page or a landscape, contrasts with specular reflection, as from a mirror.) A source of light, such as a fire, may be intriguing but it is optically baffling: the eye cannot get a 'fix' on anything within the fire. Similarly, a translucent object, such as alabaster, is intriguing because, although it is not a source of light, the eye cannot get a 'fix' on it either. Depth can be perceived by the eye, but most satisfactorily as a series of surfaces: the trunks of trees in a grove, for example, or chairs in an auditorium. The eye does not perceive an interior strictly as an interior: inside a room, the walls it perceives are still surfaces, outsides.

Taste and smell are not much help in registering interiority or exteriority. Touch is. But touch partially destroys interiority in the process of perceiving it. If I wish to discover by touch whether a box is empty or full, I have to make a hole in the box to insert a hand or finger: this means that the box is to that extent open, to that extent less an interior.

Hearing can register interiority without violating it. I can rap a box to find whether it is empty or full or a wall to find whether

it is hollow or solid inside. Or I can ring a coin to learn whether it is silver or lead.

Sounds all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces them. A violin filled with concrete will not sound like a normal violin. A saxophone sounds differently from a flute: it is structured differently inside. And above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances.

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. Vision dissects, as Merleau-Ponty has observed (1961). Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence. This centering effect of sound is what high-fidelity sound reproduction exploits with intense sophistication. You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight.

By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart (Descartes' campaigning for clarity and distinctness registered an intensification of vision in the human sensorium – Ong 1967b, pp. 63, 221). The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together.

Interiority and harmony are characteristics of human consciousness. The consciousness of each human person is totally interiorized, known to the person from the inside and inaccessible to any other person directly from the inside. Everyone who says 'I' means something different by it from what every other person means. What is 'I' to me is only 'you' to you. And this 'I' incorporates experience into itself by 'getting it all together'. Knowledge is ultimately not a fractioning but a unifying phenomenon, a striving for harmony. Without harmony, an interior condition, the psyche is in bad health.

It should be noted that the concepts interior and exterior are not mathematical concepts and cannot be differentiated mathematically. They are existentially grounded concepts, based on

experience of one's own body, which is both inside me (I do not ask you to stop kicking my body but to stop kicking *me*) and outside me (I feel myself as in some sense inside my body). The body is a frontier between myself and everything else. What we mean by 'interior' and 'exterior' can be conveyed only by reference to experience of bodiliness. Attempted definitions of 'interior' and 'exterior' are inevitably tautological: 'interior' is defined by 'in', which is defined by 'between', which is defined by 'inside', and so on round and round the tautological circle. The same is true with 'exterior'. When we speak of interior and exterior, even in the case of physical objects, we are referring to our own sense of ourselves: I am *inside* here and everything else is *outside*. By interior and exterior we point to our own experience of bodiliness (Ong 1967b, pp. 117–22, 176–9, 228, 231) and analyze other objects by reference to this experience.

In a primary oral culture, where the word has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visually perceptible text, and no awareness of even the possibility of such a text, the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word. For the way in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life. The centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but is all around me) affects man's sense of the cosmos. For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its center. Man is the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world (Eliade 1958, pp. 231–5, etc.). Only after print and the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the cosmos or universe or 'world', think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas, a vast surface or assemblage of surfaces (vision presents surfaces) ready to be 'explored'. The ancient oral world knew few 'explorers', though it did know many itinerants, travelers, voyagers, adventurers, and pilgrims.

It will be seen that most of the characteristics of orally based thought and expression discussed earlier in this chapter relate intimately to the unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound as perceived by human beings. A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies

(which would come with the inscribed, visualized word: vision is a dissecting sense). It is consonant also with the conservative holism (the homeostatic present that must be kept intact, the formulary expressions that must be kept intact), with situational thinking (again holistic, with human action at the center) rather than abstract thinking, with a certain humanistic organization of knowledge around the actions of human and anthromorphic beings, interiorized persons, rather than around impersonal things.

The denominators used here to describe the primary oral world will be useful again later to describe what happened to human consciousness when writing and print reduced the oral–aural world to a world of visualized pages.

Orality, community and the sacral

Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be reestablished only when oral speech begins again. Writing and print isolate. There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to 'audience'. The collective 'readership' – this magazine has a readership of two million – is a far-gone abstraction. To think of readers as a united group, we have to fall back on calling them an 'audience', as though they were in fact listeners. The spoken word forms unities on a large scale, too: countries with two or more different spoken languages are likely to have major problems in establishing or maintaining national unity, as today in Canada or Belgium or many developing countries.

The interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence. In most religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life. Eventually in the larger world religions

sacred texts develop, too, in which the sense of the sacral is attached also to the written word. Still, a textually supported religious tradition can continue to authenticate the primacy of the oral in many ways. In Christianity, for example, the Bible is read aloud at liturgical services. For God is thought of always as 'speaking' to human beings, not as writing to them. The orality of the mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming (Ong 1967b, pp. 176–91). The Hebrew *dabar*, which means word, means also event and thus refers directly to the spoken word. The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word. In Trinitarian theology, the Second Person of the Godhead is the Word, and the human analogue for the Word here is not the human written word, but the human spoken word. God the Father 'speaks' his Son: he does not inscribe him. Jesus, the Word of God, left nothing in writing, though he could read and write (Luke 4:16). 'Faith comes through hearing', we read in the Letter to the Romans (10:17). 'The letter kills, the spirit [breath, on which rides the spoken word] gives life' (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Words are not signs

Jacques Derrida has made the point that 'there is no linguistic sign before writing' (1976, p. 14). But neither is there a linguistic 'sign' after writing if the oral reference of the written text is adverted to. Though it releases unheard-of potentials of the word, a textual, visual representation of a word is not a real word, but a 'secondary modeling system' (cf. Lotman 1977). Thought is nested in speech, not in texts, all of which have their meanings through reference of the visible symbol to the world of sound. What the reader is seeing on this page are not real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound. It is impossible for script to be more than marks on a surface unless it is used by a conscious human being as a cue to sounded words, real or imagined, directly or indirectly.

Chirographic and typographic folk find it convincing to think of the word, essentially a sound, as a 'sign' because 'sign' refers

primarily to something visually apprehended. *Signum*, which furnished us with the word 'sign', meant the standard that a unit of the Roman army carried aloft for visual identification – etymologically, the 'object one follows' (Proto-Indo-European root, *sekw-*, to follow). Though the Romans knew the alphabet, this *signum* was not a lettered word but some kind of pictorial design or image, such as an eagle, for example.

The feeling for letter names as labels or tags was long in establishing itself, for primary orality lingered in residue, as will be seen, centuries after the invention of writing and even of print. As late as the European Renaissance, quite literate alchemists using labels for their vials and boxes tended to put on the labels not a written name, but iconographic signs, such as various signs of the zodiac, and shopkeepers identified their shops not with lettered words but with iconographic symbols such as the ivy bush for a tavern, the barber's pole, the pawnbroker's three spheres. (On iconographic labeling, see Yates 1966.) These tags or labels do not at all name what they refer to: the words 'ivy bush' are not the word 'tavern', the word 'pole' is not the word 'barber'. Names were still words that moved through time: these quiescent, unspoken, symbols were something else again. They were 'signs', as words are not.

Our complacency in thinking of words as signs is due to the tendency, perhaps incipient in oral cultures but clearly marked in chirographic cultures and far more marked in typographic and electronic cultures, to reduce all sensation and indeed all human experience to visual analogues. Sound is an event in time, and 'time marches on', relentlessly, with no stop or division. Time is seemingly tamed if we treat it spatially on a calendar or the face of a clock, where we can make it appear as divided into separate units next to each other. But this also falsifies time. Real time has no divisions at all, but is uninterruptedly continuous: at midnight yesterday did not click over into today. No one can find the *exact* point of midnight, and if it is not exact, how can it be midnight? And we have no experience of today as being next to yesterday, as it is represented on a calendar. Reduced to space, time seems more under control – but only seems to be, for real, indivisible time carries us to real death. (This is not to deny that spatial reductionism is immeasurably useful and technologically necessary, but only to

say that its accomplishments are intellectually limited, and can be deceiving.) Similarly, we reduce sound to oscillograph patterns and to waves of certain 'lengths', which can be worked with by a deaf person who can have no knowledge of what the experience of sound is. Or we reduce sound to script and to the most radical of all scripts, the alphabet.

Oral man is not so likely to think of words as 'signs', quiescent visual phenomena. Homer refers to them with the standard epithet 'winged words' – which suggests evanescence, power, and freedom: words are constantly moving, but by flight, which is a powerful form of movement, and one lifting the flier free of the ordinary, gross, heavy, 'objective' world.

In contending with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Derrida is of course quite correct in rejecting the persuasion that writing is no more than incidental to the spoken word (Derrida 1976, p. 7). But to try to construct a logic of writing without investigation in depth of the orality out of which writing emerged and in which writing is permanently and ineluctably grounded is to limit one's understanding, although it does produce at the same time effects that are brilliantly intriguing but also at times psychedelic, that is, due to sensory distortions. Freeing ourselves of chirographic and typographic bias in our understanding of language is probably more difficult than any of us can imagine, far more difficult, it would seem, than the 'deconstruction' of literature, for this 'deconstruction' remains a literary activity. More will be said about this problem in treating the internalizing of technology in the next chapter.