

Literacy and Orality in Our Times

Walter J. Ong, S.J.
Department of English
St. Louis University

Editor's Note: *I am grateful to Walter Ong and the ADE for their permission to reproduce excerpts from Father Ong's provocative essay "Literacy and Orality in Our Times" which first appeared in Profession '79, published by the Modern Language Association.*

I shall treat orality and literacy in two ways, first examining the ubiquitous and persistent problem of moving from oral expression to writing and then considering briefly some special approaches we might take in teaching writing today because of the new secondary orality that surrounds us on radio and television. In both instances my remarks are intended to be provocative rather than inclusive. There is no way to treat this protean subject inclusively.

Although its founding fathers were steeped in a still strong oral and oratorical tradition, the United States was founded in literacy, as Denis Brogan liked to point out from his vantage point in England. Written documents — the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution* — are crucial to our feeling for national identity in a way unmatched in any other nation through history, so far as I know. Most Americans, even those who write miserably, are so stubbornly literate in principle as to believe that what makes a word a real word is not its meaningful use in vocal exchange but rather its presence on the pages of a dictionary. We are so literate in ideology that we think writing comes naturally. We have to remind ourselves from time to time that writing is completely and irremediably artificial, and that what you find in a dictionary are not real words but coded marks for voicing real words, exteriorly or in imagination.

To point out that writing is artificial is not to deny that it is essential for the realization of fuller human potential and for the evolution of consciousness itself. Writing is an absolute necessity for the analytically sequential, linear organization of thought such as goes, for example, into an encyclopedia article. Without writing, as I have undertaken to explain in *The Presence of the Word* and in *Interfaces of the Word*, the mind simply cannot engage in this sort of thinking, which is unknown to primary oral cultures, where thought is exquisitely elaborated, not in analytic linearity, but in formulaic fashion, through "rhapsodizing," that is stitching together proverbs, antitheses, epithets, and other "common-places" or *loci (topoi)*. Without writing, the mind cannot even generate concepts such as "history" or "analysis," just as without print, and the massive accumulation of detailed documented knowledge which print makes possible, the mind cannot generate portmanteau concepts such as "culture" or "civilization," not to mention "macroeconomics" or "polyethylene." The *New English Dictionary* entry for "civilization" notes Boswell's report of March 23, 1772,

that Dr. Samuel Johnson would not permit the word "civilization" in his first *Dictionary* — it was too much of a neologism. Probably most of the words in our English lexicon today represent concepts which could not even be formed without writing and often without print.

In the world of the creative imagination, writing appears necessary to produce accounts of human life, that is, of what Aristotle calls "action," which are closely plotted in the sense in which Greek drama is closely plotted, with a steady rise of complex action to climax, *peripeteia* or reversal, and subsequent falling action and *denouement*. Oral genres of much length treating human "action" are typically not tightly organized in this fashion but are loose-knit and episodic. Greek drama, which first provides such tight plotting in the West, is the first verbal genre in the West to be controlled entirely by writing; staged plays were oral renditions of written compositions. Similarly, print, an extension and intensification of the visualized word produced by writing, appears absolutely, and somewhat mysteriously necessary to produce tightly plotted narrative about the in-close human life world that we find in novels, which are the products of the deep interiorization of print achieved in the Romantic Age.

All this is to say that writing, and to a degree print, are absolutely essential not just for distributing knowledge but for performing the central noetic operations which a high-technology culture takes for granted.

But, however crucial for man to arrive at his present state of consciousness, writing is still totally artificial, a technology consciously and reflectively contrived. In this it contrasts with oral speech. In any and all cultures, every human being who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired, inevitably learns to speak. Speech wells up out of the unconscious supported by unconsciously organized grammatical structures that even the most ardent structural and transformational grammarians now admit can never all be surfaced entirely into consciousness. Speech is structured through the entire fabric of the human person. Writing depends on consciously contrived rules.

Moreover, it depends on absences — which amount to the same thing as artificiality. I want to write a book which will be read by hundreds of thousands of people. So, please, everyone leave the room. I have to be alone to communicate. Let us face the utter factitiousness and fictitiousness of such a situation, which can in no way be considered natural or even normal.

To move from the entirely natural oral world into this artificial world of writing is bewildering and terrifying. How do I deal with persons who are not present to me and who never will be? For, except in the case of personal letters or their equivalents, writers commonly know almost none of their putative readers.

A recent article by a friend and former student of mine, Thomas Farrell, isolated nicely two of the basic problems a person has to face in moving from orality into the world of writing.* Everyone who teaches writing knows the common symptoms of the problems; students make assertions which are totally unsupported by reasons, or they make a series of statements which lack connections. Farrell notes that such performance is not necessarily an intellectual deficiency but only a chirographic deficiency. It is quite consistent with oral conversational situations. In conversation, if you omit reasons backing a statement and your hearer wants them, the normal response is to ask you for them, to challenge you. If the connections between the statements you make are not supplied by the concrete situation — which can supply connections of the most complex, multileveled sort, as students of ethnology well know — your interlocutor can be expected to ask you to specify the connections. Generally speaking, in live oral communication the hearer will not need many “logical” connections, again because the concrete situation supplies a full context which makes articulation, and thus abstraction, at many points, superfluous.

For the writer, the situation is totally different. No one is there to supply a real communication context, to ask anything. There is no full context other than that which the writer can project. The writer has to provide all the back-up or fill-in. In the case of creative writing, the writer has to anticipate how much detail readers are willing and able to settle for. For there is no absolute measure of how much detail you have to supply in writing about anything. In the case of expository writing, the writer must anticipate all the different senses in which any statement can be interpreted and correspondingly clarify meaning, making sure to anticipate every objection that might be made and to cover it suitably. Every objection? Well not quite. The situation is even worse than that. Select objections. The objections that the readers being addressed might think of. How is the writer to know what a particular group of imagined readers might think of? How do you imagine a group of readers anyway? For one thing, you have to read, read, read. There is no way to write unless you read, and read a lot. The writer's audience is always a fiction, and you have no way of fictionalizing your audience unless you know what some of the options for imaging audiences are — how audiences have been and are fictionalized.

The writer has also to anticipate all the connections which are needed by a particular audience of readers. In fictional

*Thomas J. Farrell, “Literacy, Basics, and All That Jazz,” *College English*, 38 (1977), 443-459.

or other narrative writing this is an exceedingly intricate and elusive business. In expository writing it is difficult, too. The writer has to learn to be “logical,” to put matters together in a sequential linear pattern so that anyone who comes along — or anyone of the group of readers being projected by the writer — can make complete sense of what is being written. There are no live persons facing the writer to clarify his thinking by their reactions. There is no feedback. There are no auditors to look pleased or puzzled. This is a desperate world, a terrifying world, a lonely, unpeopled world, not at all the world of natural oral-aural exchange.

Everyone who writes must move at some point or points in his or her life from the world of oral exchange and thought processes into the curiously estranged and yet fantastically productive world of absent audiences that the writer deals with. Today, however, the orality away from which the writer moves is of two sorts. One kind, to use a terminology which I have developed in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*, is “primary orality,” the pristine orality of mankind untouched by writing or print which remains still more or less operative in areas sheltered to a greater or lesser degree from the full impact of literacy and which is vestigial to some degree in us all. The noetic processes of primary orality, as we have seen, are formulaic and rhapsodic rather than analytic. As in Homeric epic and to a great extent in classical oratory, particularly of the more orotund variety, this orality operates with the sort of commonplaces, formulaic expressions, and clichés ordinarily despised by fully literate folk, for, without writing, an oral culture must maintain its knowledge by repeating it. Writing and, even more effectively, print store what is known outside the mind and downgrade repetitive styles. In lieu of more elaborate analytical categories, primary oral culture also tends to break down issues in simple polarities in terms of good and evil, “good guys” and “bad guys.”

The other kind of orality we now live with I have called “secondary orality.” This is the orality induced by radio and television, and it is by no means independent of writing and print but totally dependent on them. Without writing and print, electronic equipment cannot be manufactured and radio and television programming cannot be managed. (It should be noted here that, despite its name, television is in a fundamental way an oral-aural medium. It must have sound and, so far as I know, never uses purely visual devices: the weather map which you read without difficulty in the newspaper becomes a talk show on television, presided over by an articulate and attractive woman or an equally articulate and handsome man.)

The highly oral culture of our black urban ghettos as well as of certain isolated black and white rural areas is basically a primary oral culture in many ways, although it is more or less modified by contact with secondary orality today. The orality of nonghetto urban populations generally and of suburbia generally, white and black, is basically secondary orality. As Farrell has made clear in the article cited earlier,

the problems of moving students out of the two kinds of orality are not the same.



Let us take [an] example. Father Patrick Essien, an African diocesan priest of the diocese of Ikot-Ekpene, in South-East State in Nigeria, who has just finished a doctorate in educational administration at Saint Louis University, comes from a primary oral culture of a small village of the Annang, a tribe of some half million persons or more. In the curriculum vitae in his dissertation, which is about the present educational serviceability of proverbs, he proudly displays his oral credentials by noting explicitly that no one is sure of the date of his birth, and then produces complementary credentials as an experienced literate by carefully calculating what the most likely date is. Father Essien's father, now deceased, was a chief. Among the Annang, as among other peoples, this meant that he was also a judge. He used to sit in judgment over such things as property disputes: charges, for example, by a plaintiff that another was pasturing his cattle or planting his yams on the plaintiff's property. The judge-chief would listen to both sides of the case, take the matter under advisement for a while, then cite a saying or proverb, another proverb, perhaps a third and a fourth, and then deliver the verdict. Plaintiff and defendant would leave satisfied.

"But," Father Essien smiles, "you had better give voice to the proper proverbs or other sayings. Otherwise you are in deep trouble, for if you do not cite the ones that apply to the given case no one who hears the judgment is satisfied." The law is lodged in the proverbs or sayings of Annang culture — or the law was, for Father Essien remarks sadly that it is getting harder and harder to find anyone with the skills that his father practiced so well. The law has become something written and does not work that way any more. Inevitably, Father Essien's feelings are mixed, and agonizing. The Annang must move into writing, for its advantages are incontestable. But writing entails losses of much that was good and true and beautiful in the old primary oral culture. You do what you can: Father Essien's dissertation will preserve some of the orality, but alas! only in writing.

A few months ago I was telling this story to another friend. "Sayings still work that way in the oral world of young children," he said. "Sayings settle disputes." He had had some young children in a car with him for a rather long drive a few days before, and there was a dispute when one wanted to preempt a window seat for the whole ride. "Turn about is fair play," my friend had said. And the dispute evaporated; the boy at the window yielded his seat to one of the others. My friend noted the psycho-dynamics of the episode: the saying saved the youngster's face. He was moved out of place not because he was weaker or less worthy or unloved — considerations always urgent in the agonistically structured life-world of primary orality — but because "Turn about is fair play." This was something everybody knew, or should know, part of the common store of knowledge that a culture consists in. There is a deep humanity in the noetic processes of primary orality.

Settling a property dispute among adults, however, is a quite different matter from settling children's disputes. Not all have recognized this fact. Literates have had trouble understanding oral cultures precisely because in a highly literate culture experience of primary orality — or something close to primary orality — is likely to be limited to experience of the child's world. Hence persons from highly literate cultures have commonly been unable to react understandingly to adult, sophisticated levels of behavior in oral cultures but have tended to view the whole of "native" — that is, oral — populations as "child-like", including admirably adult men and women, middle-aged and older, who often have coped with life more adroitly and more successfully than their literate critics.

This defensive depreciatory interpretation of another culture by literates is itself curiously childlike. It has forced literary scholars consciously or unconsciously espousing it to go through incredible intellectual contortions to make out the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be basically texts composed in writing instead of transcriptions of essentially oral performance, because of the supposition that oral performance is not capable of the sophistication these works manifest. Thanks to the work of Parry and Lord and Havelock and their now numerous epigoni, we should be beyond this today. We should know something of the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures of primary oral noetics — how the mind works when it cannot rely directly or indirectly on writing and on the thought patterns that writing alone can initiate.

Once we know something about the psychodynamics of the oral mind, we can recognize that primary orality, at least in residual form, is still a factor in the thought habits of many of those to whom we are called upon to teach writing. Such recognition does not automatically solve our problems, but it at least enables us better to identify them. Our students from oral or residually oral cultures come not from an unorganized world, but from a world which is differently organized, in ways which can now be at least partly understood.

What of those students who come from the world of secondary oral culture? Does the oral world of radio and television drive all its denizens back from literate culture to the primary oral noetic economy? Of course not. If it did, that would be the end of radio and television. There is nothing on radio or television, however oral, not subject to some — and most often to utterly massive — chirographic and typographic control, which enters into program design, scripts, advertising, contractual agreements, diction, sentence structure, and countless other details. Primary orality cannot cope with electronic media. I recall talking to radio and television producers in Dakar a few years ago and speculating with them about how it would be to have a television series run by a *griot*, the West African singer of tales, oral purveyor of genealogies, crier of praises and taunts, custodian of the *loci* of the culture. An individual performance by a *griot* could prove interesting, the Senegalese

media people knew, but would have to be carefully supervised, for the new kind of orality had made a world utterly different from the *griot's* world, using different techniques. There was no way for a *griot* to program a radio or television series.

But how about the audience? Does the oral world of radio and television reintroduce its viewers, as against its programmers or performers, to primary oral noetics? It appears not in any sophisticated way at all. Television viewers show no tendency, so far as I can discern, to organize their knowledge and express themselves the way the Nigerian villagers do in Chinua Achebe's novels. They have no such oral mastery of proverbial thinking at all. As I have noted in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*, even relatively unsophisticated audiences in a high-technology culture feel they should scorn formulas or clichés as such, although they might not always succeed in avoiding them. Consequently, clichés addressed to audiences in a high-technology milieu tend to be accompanied by signals, verbal or other, that downgrade the clichés themselves. Archie Bunker's clichés are systematically debased by his malapropisms. The audience is encouraged and assisted to reject them and laugh at them. This is only some of the abundant evidence that popular culture is discernably under the influence of literacy today, and at many levels, even in its relatively unsophisticated members.

Secondary orality, in other words, is to varying degrees literate. In fact, a residual primary orality, literacy, and sec-

ondary orality are interacting vigorously with one another in confusing complex patterns in our secondarily oral world.

This situation does not automatically create sensitivity to literature or equip everyone with the ability to write well, but it can be made to work toward such goals. The world of secondary orality is a media-conscious world. In fact, this is the world which effectively brought about the discovery of the contrast between primary orality and literacy, and ultimately the contrast between both and secondary orality. Milman Parry and Albert Lord discovered the orality of ancient Homeric Greece not simply by studying texts but largely through sound recordings of twentieth-century Yugoslavian epic singers.

Because we live in a media-conscious world, we can make students aware of what this paper has attempted to sketch: what oral speech is and what writing is by contrast. This awareness can increase sensitivity to literature and to the problems of writing.

I am not suggesting here more courses in "the media". But I am suggesting that both those who teach writing and those who teach literature can in their teaching make a productive issue of the contrasts between the noetic and psychological milieu of primary orality, that of writing and of print, and that of secondary orality. Understanding these differences not in terms merely of slogans but circumstantially and in depth is itself a liberal education.

• • •