

## Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race

Walter J. Ong, S.J.

### I

At the end of a symposium and volume such as this, with its array of varied and brilliant papers, it is difficult to know what to say by way of conclusion other than to express my heartfelt thanks to the impressive contributors in this symposium-festschrift and to its superb organizers. One thing that I am convinced should not be done is to try to summarize the many papers presented and the discussions following them. We have had our say on these matters already. I do not want to be in the position of the speaker who announced, "I am afraid that I have spoken about these matters all too long, so please let me conclude once more."

What I shall try to do is to generalize out of all the thought-provoking papers we have heard and to say something about orality-literacy studies themselves as a whole. I shall have the temerity to generalize as widely as possible, for I have chosen as my subject nothing less than "Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race." I do believe that what we have been about speaks in its own special way to the subject of human unity which is so urgent in our war-ridden and even war-mongering times.

### II

Orality-literacy contrasts represent a new field of study with a still undetermined but already vast range. The varied themes of the papers presented at this symposium manifest this range in impressive ways, and consultation of the literature they refer to makes the range all the wider. In the literature available today, orality-literacy studies have made their way into psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, intellectual history, philosophy,

including metaphysics itself, literary history (which over the centuries preserves oral residue in forms and intensities still not all accounted for), critical theory from reassessments of the old New Criticism and formalism to reader-response theory, religious history and theology (Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and other), and the theory and use of electronic communication. (This last comes into being following on orality and literacy but in its own way intricately involves both.) On the one hand, the computer extends the elaborated linear analysis introduced by writing to an unimaginable extent while, on the other hand, the telephone, radio, and television produce a world of what I have styled "secondary orality," which fills the air with words, mingled with other sound. By contrast with "primary orality," which is the original orality of human beings totally unacquainted with even the idea of writing, the world of secondary orality for its coming into being and its operation demands writing and print and now, more and more, computers themselves. Far from being destroyed by electronics, orality and literacy interlace in electronic communication more complexly than ever before—so much so that we have not yet developed adequate concepts and terms to describe the interlacing.

Orality-literacy studies are beginning to revise the history of academic education, at least that of the West, as they reveal the oral-agonistic nature of schools until recently populated exclusively by males taught in a chirographically controlled but orally targeted language, Learned Latin, spoken by millions of males all of whom could also write it and yet governed in its expression by the all-pervasive art of rhetoric, which still maintained its original meaning of public speaking or platform address (Ong 1981).

Orality-literacy studies have even helped explain, in a recent article by James A. Aho, the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, which, it appears, was devised not to serve exclusively informational or theoretical ends but rather for rhetorical purposes, "to justify an activity about which there existed in medieval Christian Europe a considerable suspicion: namely, commerce" (Aho 1985:22). Double-entry bookkeeping was calculated to persuade an audience by the exact balance of debit and credit that there existed an "ultimate harmony underlying the conflicting claims of the parties in a business transaction" (24), and to exercise its persuasion in an orally governed world. At its beginnings, account keeping was still physically involved in the world of rhetoric, the world of public speaking, for accounts were normally read aloud to

the responsible party, whom we still today call an "auditor," that is, a hearer (20; cf. Clanchy 1971:215). Our present-day term still surreptitiously memorializes the old oral-aural world. In a residually oral culture you understood what the financial facts were if you heard about them better than if you looked at rows of figures.

At the risk of seeming to range altogether too far afield, I might note that awareness of orality-literacy contrasts may even be of some use in pongid linguistics. Procedures used in trying to teach speech to the Pongidae or great apes—mostly, in fact, to chimpanzees—appear often to be based unwittingly upon a model of language provided not by talk but by literacy. The apes are fed oral language word-by-word, as though they were working with word lists. Children do not learn languages quite this way. While it is true that at certain stages they do of course pick up some individual words individually, their learning processes are basically much more complex. They sense that in the vocalizations of older persons something is going on that they want to be part of. They want to "get into the act" which discourse is (Heath 1983: *passim*). There is little indication that apes want spontaneously to "get into the act" of human discourse (De Luce and Wilder 1983), and even less that they are constructing a whole world for themselves by dealing with language and its densities, as Piaget has shown children always do. Little wonder that apes are far more successful at manipulating counters by hand or at using hand signals than at mouthing words, for which both their articulatory apparatus and their neurophysiological organization have ill prepared them.

### III

The reason for the extraordinary diversity that attends the study of orality-literacy contrasts and for the usefulness of these contrasts in coming to a better understanding of deep human concerns is not far to seek: it is that these contrasts ultimately settle so deeply into the human psyche. Persons who have deeply interiorized literacy can no longer separate literacy from their natural mental process, as I have tried to explain in detail in *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

Cultures are polarized across the world today between effectively literate, high-technology cultures and cultures still largely oral (with varying but notably restricted degrees of literacy), lacking high technology. Within high-technology cultures,

such as that of the United States, a similar polarization on a lesser scale often exists between effectively literate populations and illiterates or marginally literate persons, often from ethnic subcultures. Roughly speaking, these poles of literacy and orality commonly, if not always, represent the haves and the have-nots in our present world. Literate, high-technology cultures have often treated those at the other pole of human existence by resort to concepts such as the "savage" mind or the "primitive" mind or the "prelogical" mind (which is to say the illogical or at least the sublogical mind) or even by resort to Lucien Lévi-Bruhl's more outspoken "inferior cultures"—*Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910). In his recent *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), the Netherlands anthropologist Johannes Fabian has reported on the ways in which Western (of course literate) anthropologists have in the past regularly, if unconsciously and subtly, downgraded the (generally oral) peoples who have in the past commonly been the subjects of their research. This condition has been bettered now, no doubt in part because anthropologists have enlarged their original dominant interest in "primitive" or "lower" peoples to include in their purview all of us human beings. The enlargement of the field has brought improvement of vision and greater tolerance and understanding.

As I have suggested in *Orality and Literacy* (1982:174-75), we can avoid the earlier invidious terms by translating the difference between the two poles as that between literate and oral peoples. I do not mean to suggest that orality or other cultural features are exactly the same in all cultures without writing any more than that all literate cultures use literacy exactly the same way, but simply that, as noted earlier, there are common characteristics that mark the speech and thought of primary orality and that contrast saliently with certain features of literate cultures, not to mention print and electronic cultures.

We should note here also that, applied to an entire culture, the term "oral" is preferable also to "illiterate," which is subtly downgrading, designating a culture by something it lacks that we have. (Sometimes, of course, "illiterate" is useful to refer to persons in a basically literate culture who have not learned to read and write.) Orality is a positive trait, which literate cultures also have—though in a different way. We still talk, perhaps even more than our ancestors in primary oral cultures. But we do not talk in

the same style or out of the same thought forms. An oral culture's thought forms are just as human as ours—one could argue in certain ways more human, for they do not draw on the technology of writing, which is, as all technologies are, a human invention but which is also in some way external to the human being.

What happens when we substitute for "savage" or "primitive" or "prelogical" or "inferior" or similar denigrating terms the term "oral"? Basically, I would suggest, it can give us a new experience of the unity of the human race, diachronically and synchronically. Let me suggest some ways in which it can do this.

First, a clear continuity is established between oral cultures, ancient and modern, and ourselves. Writing, it is true, marks a dividing line, but, once we know basically what writing does to thought and to consciousness itself, we know in some sort what the dividing line is and, in general, what the effects are once it is crossed. Writing is a technology that restructures thought and consciousness. It is not, as I have indicated earlier, the only development that affects thought and consciousness, but it is the most radical and pervasive across the centuries and across the surface of the globe.

Knowing the effects of writing on ourselves, knowing how much of what we consider simply human is due to the appropriation of writing, we can enter into the state of consciousness of oral peoples—never directly, but reflectively. And reflectively entry has even some advantages over direct entry, for primary oral cultures can hardly reflect on orality as such by contrast with the literacy they do not know. Entering oral consciousness reflectively, we can experience the people there as our brothers and sisters. We can feel what we are like without the support of writing technology. Their thought processes—many of them, though certainly not all—differ from ours not because they are "savage" or "inferior" but because they are what the oral economy of managing language and thought demands. Oral peoples can have high intelligence and can be very wise. They are what we ourselves are like apart from the support of the writing that has penetrated our psyches so deeply that we can never entirely separate it from ourselves. Knowing the nature of orality-literacy contrasts, we can more deeply empathize with the Homeric Greeks, the old Anglo-Saxons, the modern Seneca in the State of New York, the present-day African Nyanza people in Zaire, the West

African Mande, the modern Mongols, the Javanese, and the rest of the peoples in the more than ninety different oral language and cultural areas reported on by John Miles Foley in his *Oral-Formulate Theory and Research* (1985). (It should be noted that in the case of many of these peoples literacy is not entirely unknown, but that a high degree of primary orality still informs their cultures.)

Of course, anthropological studies of many sorts in recent times have done much to create empathy and genuine human bonds of nonpatronizing affection between anthropologists from literate cultures and oral peoples. But none, I think, can range farther or more deeply than orality-literacy studies. The reason is profound. Writing is the technology which in a significant way marks the deepest encounter between human consciousness and the exterior, nonhuman world.

Secondly, since writing takes possession of consciousness and culture slowly and in ways conditioned by the variances between cultures, if we know both sides of the orality-literacy watershed, we can empathize with the intermediate stages between primary orality, early scribal literacy, academized literacy, and all the other literacies which vary so kaleidoscopically as to make a simple definition of literacy quite impossible. Since literacy touches so much in culture—commerce, craftsmanship and industry, family structure, religious institutions, political structures and behavior, and all the rest—we can put ourselves in contact with the entirety of another culture's life. Literacy, we must note again, does not explain everything in a culture, but it relates to almost everything, and in myriads of ways. It does so in our own lives, where we live in orality-literacy contrasts multiplied beyond measure in the new electronic media. Our deep involvement in these contrasts can bring us a deeper understanding of others who differ from us only in that their cultures bring them to live out in different ways problems we all share.

Mention of the new electronic processing of the word suggests a third way in which familiarity with humankind's originally oral world and thereby with orality-literacy contrasts can enrich our sense of the unity of the human race. For orality-literacy studies look simultaneously to the past and to the future. Some of the most attentive reading about orality-literacy contrasts—contrasts in times past as well as present contrasts—is done today by persons in radio and television work. I can testify from personal experience

that such persons are as likely to attend lectures I give on orality and literacy as are persons teaching ancient Greek epic or *Beowulf* or modern African folklore. The ages of primary orality, chirography, typography, and electronics, despite their radical breaks with one another in some ways, in other ways form a continuum. As we have seen, the electronic age has maximized both orality and the effects of writing and print. This age of secondary orality has maximized oral utterance through the telephone, radio, and television in ways unknown to oral peoples, and yet at the same time has maximized the analytic, linear processing of thought and expression which writing initiated to a point unimaginable in a purely writing and/or print culture. Electronics, in other words, builds up both orality and literacy, but the orality and literacy which emerge from an electronic culture are not quite the same as pre-electronic orality and literacy, from which they differ in organization and in social import.

The effects of the computer on the thought and consciousness formerly supported by literacy have not been assessed as yet in anything like full depth. Pop psychology and pop sociology tell us nothing of what is really happening. They themselves are part of the media "hype" that spins off automatically from the culture they pretend to assess. To understand the effects of the computer on thought and consciousness we need disciplined study, which can profit from use of the computer where this is helpful (it is not always helpful, let alone necessary, in assessing some of the effects even of the computer).

Fourthly and finally, orality-literacy studies raise a question which is so profound and mystifying that it has seldom if ever been treated, to the best of my knowledge. That is, what is the relationship in depth between human consciousness and technology at the point where consciousness and technology enter into the most intensive alliances? Thousands of books on technology exist and hundreds more come out every year. How many of them take cognizance of the following facts?

(1) The human mind needs to use an extraneous technology, writing—and if you do not believe that it is extraneous, read Plato's *Phaedrus* and his *Seventh Letter*—in order to create what we style a scientific treatment of any subject. Oral cultures have great wisdom, but none of them have the extended, analytic explanation of the world that we call science today, in the large sense of this word, including not only the physical sciences but also

the humane sciences, such as the study of verbal utterance, written or oral.

(2) As Havelock's recent monograph, "The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics" (1983), has painstakingly shown, before writing had taken possession of the Greek consciousness, the central question of metaphysics, the nature of being, Aristotle's *ti ên ênainai*, could not effectively suggest itself to the human mind. All science needs writing in order to achieve the tight, sequential, linear, "logical" organization that science requires. But metaphysics needs writing not only to organize itself analytically as a science but also to become aware of its quarry, being or existence as such. Oral cultures concern themselves with doings, with happenings, not with being as such: they narrativize their own existence and their environment. Metaphysics is not fond of narrative. It wants to know what a thing *is*, and ultimately what *is* or being or existence itself is. To oral peoples, such questions appear trivializing. What does all this say about the intimate relationship of the deepest interior of the human mind to technology? Without the technology of writing, it appears, the mind cannot find, or even take an interest in, the subject-matter of metaphysics.

(3) Why was it that the first machine working with replaceable parts to mass-produce complex objects themselves made up of replaceable parts was not a machine to manufacture swords or shoes or guns but, rather, the printing press, which manufactured books for the use of the human mind? What does this say about the relationship of the human mind to mass-producing technologies which have succeeded the printing press in countless numbers today? Can we dream of humanizing them as we have humanized writing and print? We had better do more than dream about doing so, or we are lost.

One truth stands out here. These two crucial and pervasive technologies, writing and print, were developed at the service of human consciousness, of the human interior, of the spirit, the soul, not at the service of operations directly in the exterior, material world. The human mind took them into itself for its own use—a use not always morally good, not always unselfish, but human nevertheless. The human mind relies on alliance with the external world for its own interior work much more than we have been aware. But the human being also has the power to convert the external world and its technological operations there into something of deep spiritual worth. Orality-literacy studies can at least alert

us to the truth that technologies grow out of the interior human lifeworld and need constantly to be referred back to that world, where we ourselves live as human persons.

It seems a far cry from the relatively simple technology of writing or even from print to the vast technologies whose products we know today—an automobile, an airplane, spacecraft, an automated automobile manufacturing plant. The line from writing to print to the computer is really a direct line, as earlier suggested, moving toward greater and greater linear, quantified, analysis achieved by more and more refined management of local motion. Yet writing, print, and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word. The other gargantuan technologies have mostly to do with the creation of machines or other products for physical use—high-rise buildings, for example—that themselves have nothing to do with technologies for the management of thought and expression.

Yet the management of thought and expression has more and more to do with them. These gargantuan technologies are more and more the products not just of writing and print but of computerized technologizing of the word. Through the computer, the technologized word is reaching deeper and deeper into the heart of our ordinary lives. That is to say, today the alliance of thought and expression with technology that began with writing is becoming more and more intense. What does this say about human responsibility? Plato had Socrates protest that writing is destructive of human values—and then went ahead to put this observation into writing. Writing did not destroy human values, but it made it necessary to handle them on a different basis—in terms of more abstract principles (see Havelock 1978). Print brought new problems of value management. And computers bring still more. Somehow, we must find a way to interiorize the resources of the computer, to humanize them as we have humanized writing and print. The task is overwhelming and I have no easy directives for carrying it through. But we must manage. Otherwise, it is star wars forever.

What we need ultimately is a new and more comprehensive cosmology that takes into account both the close connections of the human person with the physical universe and the utter difference of each human person—the "I" that you and I each speak—from the physical universe. The old Aristotelian cosmology is long outmoded, but neither Copernicus nor Galileo nor Newton nor

Lamarck nor Darwin nor Marx nor Einstein at all suffice any more, although we can learn from all of them. None of these allow for such possibilities as computerized genetic engineering, which poses moral problems earlier human beings could not even conceive. We need an open cosmology—something, perhaps, like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's in *The Phenomenon of Man*: human beings are phenomena within the physical universe who in their self-consciousness also break out of the physical universe. But Teilhard when he died in 1955 did not yet know very much if anything of computers or of orality-literacy contrasts. Human self-consciousness, with the reflectiveness it entails, has made thought and language and has created the alliance between thought and language on the one hand and on the other the technologies of thought and language, writing, print, and electronic verbalization. The meaning of the technologizing of the word lies very near the center of the meaning of the cosmos in its relationship to the human being and of the human being in relationship to the cosmos.

The cross-cultural understanding which orality-literacy studies make possible enriches the human spirit and opens the possibility for greater understanding and love between diverse peoples and for greater understanding of the intimacy with which technologies relate to human life. But it is not a cure-all for human misunderstanding and greed and ambition. I am under no illusions that orality-literacy studies will be any more redemptive or any freer of human failings than other purely human efforts. Still, the more human human beings are, the more there is in them to be redeemed. Orality-literacy studies can enlarge our humanity and open it more to redemptive powers beyond mere human reach.

However, although orality-literacy studies are not redemptive, nevertheless such studies can open new depths in our understanding of the work of redemption as known to Christian faith—and doubtless in our understanding of other religious beliefs, for which I shall not undertake to speak here. Beneath the text of the Bible lies a vast oral tradition. This biblical scholars have long known. But, until the recent intensive study of orality-literacy contrasts, the psychodynamics of oral modes of thought and expression have been very inadequately understood by biblical scholars as by others. We have been handicapped, as literates, for we have commonly, if unwittingly, interpreted oral thought and expression as a variant of literate thought and expression—in effect, as literate thought and

expression that simply failed to get put down in writing—instead of assessing oral thought and expression on their own grounds, which are quite different from those of literacy. Yet, because of its orally grounded prophetic and witnessing cast, the Bible is very likely the most variegated orality-literacy mix we have in any text. Moreover, despite the radical primacy that the biblical text has in Christian tradition, the Word of God, who is the Son, is to be thought of by analogy with the human spoken word, not the written word. Our growing appreciation of the economy of oral thought and expression promises to deepen our understanding of the word of God in the fullness of all its various senses, to provide new insights for biblical studies and thereby for the study of salvation history, that is, of the work of redemption itself as this manifests itself in biblical faith, as well as new insights into the other religions of the world which rely on texts developing out of unimaginably rich oral prehistories.

Saint Louis University

#### References

- Aho 1965  
James A. Aho. "Rhetoric and the Invention of Double Entry Bookkeeping." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of the Rhetoric*, 3:21-43.
- Clanchy 1971  
M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- De Luce and Wilder 1983  
Judith De Luce and Hugh T. Wilder, eds. *Language in Primates: Perspectives and Implications*. Springer Series in Language and Communication, II. New York, Berlin, Heidelberg, Tokyo: Springer Verlag.—Eleven chapters by eleven different authors. See especially ch. 1, H. S. Terrace, "Apes Who 'Talk': Language or Projection of Language by Their Teachers?" pp. 19-42.
- Fabian 1983  
Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Foley 1985  
John Miles Foley. *Oral Formulaic-Theory: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York and London: Garland. Provides summaries of over 1800 books and articles covering 90 different language areas.

- Havelock 1978  
Eric A. Havelock. *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Havelock 1983  
"The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics." In *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*. Ed. Kevin Robb. La Salle, IL: The Hegeler Institute, Monist Library of Philosophy. pp. 7-82.
- Heath 1983  
Shirley Brice Heath. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong 1981  
Walter J. Ong. *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ong 1982  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Piaget 1967  
Jean Piaget. *The Child's Conception of the World*. Trans. Joan and Andrew Tomlinson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Piaget 1977  
\_\_\_\_\_. *The Essential Piaget*. Ed. Howard E. Gruber and J. Jacques Voneche. New York: Basic Books.

