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John Zemke
University of Missouri
zemkej@missouri.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-3038-0812

VOICE AND LETTER: THE FIRST MADE LAST?

Abstract

The author argues that while all narratives, traditional or otherwise, are verbal, their strategies are mental. Oral traditions are neither more nor less than a particular hyponymy of language.

Keywords: Narrative strategies, thought and literacy, the Great Divide, Voice, Verbalization

> "Knowledge in books [is like] money in someone else's hands: when you need it, it's not there." (Collins, "Notes," 121: n. 2: *potthakesu ca yam sippamparahatthesu yam dhanam/ yathākiccesamuppannena tam sippam no tam dhanam* (Dhn 364 = Lkn 13)[1]

The theme of my essay is simple: Narratives consist of thought, image, word, syntax, sound, communication. My argument is straightforward: Narrative strategies are imagined first,

[1] The abbreviations are an internal reference to two different Pali collections of Buddhist aphorisms that are otherwise unidentified by the author, Collins.

verbalized second, and written, only sometimes. I will try to draw together seven threads in support of this idea: (1) Strategies, oral and written; (2) Does literacy restructure thought? (3) Invention; (4) Voice; (5) Revision; (6) The Great Divide, four counterexamples; (7) Voice, then and there, here and now.

One topic of interest is contrasting narrative strategies in orally composed works with those operating in written compositions on the premise that separate communicative channels entail, require or encourage different procedures and morphologies. Tests of this hypothesis have yielded corroborating evidence that some strategies appear to be characteristic of a given channel. Murray Emmeneau's study of the Dravidian speaking Todas of South India (*Style and Meaning in Oral Literature*, 1966) identified usages in prosaic speech that conveys information that differ from those in extemporary fixed-formula songs which comment on individual sentiments or social situations. In the field of medieval Spanish literature, Ramón Menéndez Pidal enumerated characteristics of the traditional epic and ballad: intensity, reduction of expression to the essential, words in action more than description, echo and repetition, immediacy of complex forms by accumulation, impersonality, timelessness, and, concerning the ballad, fragmentation and what he termed "saber callar a tiempo," to fall silent at the just the right moment, *kairos*. Paul Zumthor considered these traits to be distinctive of orally transmitted literature.[2] Clear differences, indeed.

Yet narratives and poems, whether written or oral, share the same grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Are oral forms distinct from written forms? Do different media construct texts in different ways? After some reflection, my view is that narratives and poems are composed in thought and made verbal for communication: the verbal text constitutes the sole meaningful form, spoken or written.

[2] ZUMTHOR 1984, 82.

From the dictum pronounced by Zumthor, "the oral text [...] cannot differ fundamentally from the written"[3], I deduce that the converse holds: a written form differs from its oral source in visual medium only, its phonic dimension, voice, architecture, and meaning are not altered by the interposition of written letters.[4] With the exception of wholly improvised forms, such as the Basque *bertso* poetic contests, a narrative is composed prior to its performance. This essay attempts to make an argument supporting the position that the selection of narrative strategies depends on genre rather than medium. What differentiates written from spoken texts are the paralinguistic and gestural features at the disposal of an oral storyteller, which are unavailable to a writer.

Question: Do oral and written versions of the same or different narratives embody significant divergences? The answer follows from where one stands on a related non-trivial question: do writing and literacy restructure thought? The answer to that question will hew closely to the respondent's discipline. An anthropological linguist is unlikely to agree that literacy confers any significant intellectual advantage otherwise unavailable to the illiterate mind. Conversely, a host of psychologists, sociologists, classicists, and anthropologists, would likely subscribe to that very proposition. As to the validity of such a claim, my review of the literature leaves me dubious.

Let me rephrase my question, substituting the term 'narrative' for the term 'thought': do writing and literacy restructure

[3] ZUMTHOR 1984, 76.

[4] Compare Donald A. Russell's translation of Quintilian's statement (*Institutiones oratoriae* 12.10.51): "These subtle teachers (as they have persuaded themselves and others that they are) have pronounced that the Example is more suited to the spoken word, and the Enthymeme to the written. In my view, however, speaking well and writing well are one and the same thing, and a written speech is nothing but the record of a spoken pleading" (Quin illi subtiles, ut sibi ac multis persuaerunt, magistri παράδειγμα dicendo, ἐνθύμημα scribendo esse aptius tradiderunt. Mihi unum atque idem videtur bene dicere ac bene scribere, neque aliud esse oratio scirpta quam monumentum actionis habitae).

narrative? My response, subject to revision, is no and yes, in that order. It seems to be less a question of a communicative channel dictating narrative strategies and rather more the case that the genre in which the artist is at play controls narrative strategies, and more broadly, the genre's socialization, and the tradition's ongoing reinvention of itself.[5] But I am getting ahead of myself, dealing myself a stronger hand than I may hold.

My theory betrays a significant weakness: it rests on an essentialist footing, on the premise that the paramount role phonology plays in linguistic communication cannot be discounted. Philology concerns itself with the social and temporal circulation of texts. From a philological standpoint, the study of texts precedes formulating theories about them, but I am not studying specific tokens of verbal art, so it is poor philology. Though unreliable ground, my warrant for pursuing what may prove to be a partial argument is the essentially phonic nature of linguistic communication. To restate my theory of the case: Narratives take shape in the imagination, they organize experience, are memorable, and are communicated verbally before, if ever, being put into writing.[6] Imagined, or real, stories organize images, actants, tests, emotions, stimuli and responses which are emplotted in situations, conflicts, and events that unfold syntactically – a beginning, a middle, and an end – expressed in time orally and comprehended aurally in time.

The interlocutors' primary medium of communication is phonological. This system indexes a morphemic system that points towards sense, and is supplemented by focalizing paralinguistic features, intonation, tone, and gesture. Writing is

[5] On this point see, Franz Fanton's reflections on the transformation of Algerian oral traditions in the period of 1952–1953 (*The Wretched of the Earth*, reproduced in LEITCH 2001, pp. 1589–1590).

[6] Walter Benjamin asserted "mentalbeingis identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication" (BENJAMIN 2001, 63). "All expression, insofar as it is a communication of contents of the mind, is to be classed as language" (pp. 62–63).

a separate spatial channel. It intervenes in the narrative process *after* the time of the imagining of the narrative.

A story begins with an author's intention to tell it through thoughts made into images that particularize situations and events which are communicated in linguistic form roughly in the sequence: thought, sense, image, syntax, lexeme, phoneme, allophone. An auditor decodes these in reverse order: sounds index words that imply images from which one infers meanings.[7]

The traditional Spanish ballad, *el romance*, is a dynamic and variable form that integrates formulae, motifs, plot, and action into a circumstantially stable narrative. Its basic unit is the formula, concrete visual images that dramatize and transform the action from a time before into a time after. This ballad tradition consists of singers' memorized model texts that generate variants in the process of memorization.[8] A Scottish storyteller, Duncan Williamson, reported that thestories he tells unfold in his mind's eye.[9] The Tibetan epic oral poet Grags-pa seng-ge holds a blank sheet of paper before his eyes and sees the images and actions of the narrative he recounts projected on it.[10]

"[T]he literature on aphasia and the comparative evidence make thought prior to speech, not conditional on it".[11] Just as thought is prior to speech, so, too, speech is prior to writing. Evidence supporting this view includes the universality and biological basis of speech, the late development of writing, greater frequency of speech; spoken language's resistance to manipulation, and the chronological priority of speech in

[7] Images, symbols, and metaphors are the basic material of storytelling. Language summons or invites meanings and orders the aesthetic experiencing of the narrative material.

[8] ZEMKE 1998, 213.

[9] See NILES 2010, 186: "When Ah tell a story of a man who told me the story, Ah can visualize him in my memory, still there, still the same person, still alive, telin me the story, every single word. I'm repeatin as if he was jist sendin me a phone message through his memory to me at the present moment."

[10] See FOLEY 2002.

[11] GEERTZ 1973, 77.

human and individual histories.[12] What John Lyons[13] termed the 'priorities' of speech – phylogenetic, ontogenetic, functional, and structural – the late Roy Harris rejected, asking why vocal sound should be the determining criterion for defining language, "to the exclusion of writing, except in the case of those languages which happen to have no written form".[14] For nearly one-half of the world's languages such is precisely the case, they have no written form.[15]

In alphabetic or syllabic writing, each letter or character represents more-or-less accurately a given sound recoded as a visual symbol, Alan Rumsey[16] affirmed that:

> This view has a certain plausibility. It is less plausible with respect to ideographic scripts such as the Chinese, and even less so with respect to gestural systems such as American Sign Language. For these do not simply transpose spoken language into a different medium.

From this, I understand that alphabetic or syllabic writing "simply transposes spoken language into a different medium."

Verbal arts are, of course, fictions, yet according to John Searle, there is no textual property, syntactic or semantic, that identifies a work as fictional.[17] That status depends on "the illocutionary stance the author takes"[18] and, Searle found, authorial intention is constant whether in written or spoken language: "what differs is the role of the context of the utterance".[19]

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[12] STUBBS 1980, 24–25.

[13] Lyons 1972, quoted in HARRIS 2009, 54.

[14] Lyons 1972, quoted in HARRIS 2009, 54.

[15] Ethnologue reports that by its count there are 7,111 living languages, of which 3,995 have a developed writing system and 3,116 are "likely" unwritten. Nevertheless, there are only five original writing systems: Sumerian, Egyptian, Harrapan, Mayan, and Chinese.

[16] RUMSEY 2000, 170.

[17] SEARLE 1975.

[18] SEARLE 1975, 325.

[19] SEARLE 1977, 201.

An auditor perceives the narrative's telling via meaningful sounds.[20] And a reader gets at meaning in the same way: through a portal of sounds that opens onto morphemes, syntax, and meaning. It matters that the reader is reading only because it is an interface, one more step in getting at the meaning-making and the meaning-made.

It is the human voice that ushers auditor and reader into the story world. Visual engagement with written signs is only a means to an end. Wulf Oesterreicher[21] emphasized the point: "simple medium-transcoding does not affect the conceptional content of discourse". Paul Zumthor insisted that orality is an abstraction, that voice alone is tangible; it is only by listening that we come into contact with reality.[22]

At what point in the chain of invention, formulation, and communication, then, can writing intervene to shape a text? At the moment of editing, which permits revisions prior to the sending of a message. Writing allows me to revise everything I am saying, but only after the thought has been put into words, an advantage for shaping a narrative, but only after its initial composition. Editing, nonetheless, is not exclusive to writing. Consider the example of the Somali oral poets who mentally compose dense, lexically elaborated texts, relying on memory without the aid of writing.[23] They put their texts through multiple revisions over a period of days, relying on the power of memory.[24]

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[20] Listening depends on the perception that the sounds being heard are meaningful, only then does an algorithmic sound decoding process recognize phonemes and morphemes and combine them into words, clauses, sentences, and utterances (ZEVIT 1990, 390).

[21] OESTERREICHER 1997, 196.

[22] "L'oralité est une abstraction; seule la voix est concrète, seule son écoute nous fait toucher aux choses", *La lettre et la voix*, quoted in BAKKER 1997, 7.

[23] JOHNSON 2006, esp. pp. 130–134.

[24] ANDRZEJEWSKI, LEWIS 1964, 45. For a full account of the characteristics of Somali verse, composition, memorization and oral transmission see ANDRZEJEWSKI, LEWIS 1964, 42–53.

Discourse studies have examined how literacy might create differences in spoken and written language. Some scholars aver that written language differs fundamentally from spoken language,[25] even claiming that "particular writing systems […] deeply affect world view and being in the world".[26] Other scholars,[27] find no essential correlation between literacy and technology.[28] "Orality and literacy share many common features, but features correlated with one or the other have more to do with the context in which language is used than with oral versus literate use".[29] Multiple studies of black and white working class families in Piedmont Carolina led Shirley Brice Heath to conclude that written materials have no meaning, use, or currency apart from their oral interpretation.[30] Deborah Tannen (1980) found strategies associated with writing to be present in spoken language, and rejected "the oral-literated ichotomy as a determiner of linguistic form".[31]

The genesis of the "Great Divide Theory" and its pernicious effects in various academic disciplines is too well known to detain us here.[32] Nevertheless, Daniel Veidlinger's trench ant criticism[33] bears repeating:[34]

> [It] is a materialist theory; in its strong version it leads to a kind of technological determinism, it sees all social and historical

[25] O'DONNELL 1974; OLSON 1977; CHAFE 1982.
[26] CHAFE, TANNEN 1987, 392.
[27] BLOCH 1998; HALVERSON 1991; HORNBERGER 1994.
[28] BIBER 2009, 75.
[29] HORNBERGER 1994, 114.
[30] HEATH 1983, 122–125. This insight is of a piece with the idea that "no fact is meaningful apart from interpretation – an observation that rests on schema theory […], frame semantics, and the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger" (Frank Smith, *A Metaphor for Literacy*, 216; quoted in CHAFE, TANNEN 1987, 396).
[31] CHAFE, TANNEN 1987, 394.
[32] Articulated by OLSON 1986; McLUHAN 1962; GOODY, WATT 1968; HAVELOCK 1982; ONG 1982; CHAFE, DANIELEWICZ 1987.
[33] Writing restructures thought and "is necessary for the forms of consciousness found in modern Western thought" (FELDMAN 1991, 47).
[34] VEIDLINGER 2006, 7–8.

transformations asproducts of changes in modes of communication.

There is more than sufficient evidence to refute the Goody and Watt hypothesis. J. Peter Denny summarized the findings of his review of the literature on rational thought in oral and literate cultures thus, "rationality, intentionality, causal thinking, classification, explanation, and originality, are characteristic of all human thought".[35] A close reading of the relationship in European, Malagasy, and Japanese cultures between knowledge, writing, and speech, led Maurice Bloch to lament "the way Goody conceptualises the relationship between knowledge and writing is both ethnocentric and misleading" (1998, 152); Bloch reported that: "the nature of [Chinese] ideograms [is] not as units of sound but as units of knowledge" (1998, 166). Ideograms contrast with how phonological alphabets link spatial signs to verbal signs. The evidence supporting scriptism is in conclusive, and counter vailing evidence places it in doubt or disproves it altogether.[36]

In the pre-modern world, writing was often considered a mnemonic device, a way to learn a text by heart. Scriptural texts, the Vedas, the Buddhist *suttas*, the *Torah*, and the *Qu'ran*, for instance, are restricted to verbatim transmission.[37] Societies with developed literate cultures have shown a predilection for the oral transmission of scripture. Why? Word power. Brahmanical culture considers writing a source of impurity,[38] preferring oral verbatim memorization for learning

[35] DENNY 1991, 81.

[36] My anti-scriptist view aligns with once standard-issue linguistic thinking on primary and secondary channels of communication. That some scholars regard it as ill-informed at best, and benightedly naive at worst, is of little consequence.

[37] Though "modern research has shown [...] [oral] literature is re-created at every re-telling" (GOMBRICH 1990, 21) certain classes of oral texts are constrained from variation.

[38] VEIDLINGER 2006, 24.

and reciting its holiest texts, the Vedas. Their extension notwithstanding, the Vedas have been orally transmitted for more than three and one-half millenia. In Sanskrit, a Vedic hymn is a *sūkta*, meaning 'well spoken'. All of the Vedas are categorized as *śruti*, 'what is heard'. The vast quantity of Vedic literature obligated the reciters to divide it into various branches (*śākhā*) for specialization. The Vedas, with their commentaries are, I submit, *in-controvertible* evidence that disproves scriptisim claims for the superior fidelity of written transmission and bear witness to the trained mind's ability to organize large amounts of data into working systems of knowledge, without the aid of written texts.

Sometime near the mid-fourth century BCE, Pānini composed his Sanskrit grammar, the *Astādhyāyī*, without the aid of writing. It consists of 3,959 "verses" or rules on linguistics, syntax and semantics, what Bloomfield called "one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence".[39] Frits Staal[40] demonstrated how Pānini accomplished this feat. Staal describes eleven separate mnemonic techniques and shows how *sandhi*, the syntactic phenomenon that modifies Sanskrit base word forms but leaves isolated words unchanged, operates in order to illustrate Pānini's task. The Brahmanic curriculum required pandits to memorize both the base and the *sandhi* forms, giving them instant access to each and every word of the Vedic texts;[41] this was the foundation of Pānini's work:

> The brahmins who preserved the 'text' did not possess any 'text'; they had committed the entire Rigveda to memory as they had learned it from their teachers, who had committed it to memory as they had learned it from their teachers – and so on, like the proverbial turtle on which the world rests, which rests on a turtle which rests on a turtle – 'turtles all the way down.'"

[39] BLOOMFIELD 1933, 11, quoted in STAAL 1986, 282.
[40] STAAL 1986.
[41] STAAL 1986, 262.

The transmission of texts, *adhyāya*, meaning 'studying' or 'recitation'[42] was carried out orally.[43] Orally codified and transmitted,[44] the wording of a mantra is always identical. The history of the Rigveda, Staal observed, challenges Western notions of what is feasible via oral transmission:[45]

> That the Rigveda was orally composed – no one has ever doubted it. […] But that Pānini's grammar, […] could have been orally composed is an idea that has never appealed or even made sense to Western scholars.[46]

Let me turn to the Buddhist tradition, about which "there is universal scholarly consensus that the earliest phase of the Buddhist textual tradition was oral".[47] Its essential oral nature is explicit in the formula that introduces a teaching of the Buddha in a Buddhist text, *evam me sutam* 'Thus have I heard' (Pali).[48] Buddhist monks wished to disseminate the *saddhamma*, 'the trueteaching', and the wording mattered. To safeguard communal discipline and maintain coherent dogma necessitated preserving the *Buddhavacana*, the Buddha's speech, in formalized texts, and transmitting the *saddhamma*, the 'true teaching', by systematic rehearsal from teacher to pupil.[49] Though writing was available, the Buddhist textual tradition was maintained through oral/aural teaching.[50] The verb *vāceti*, meaning 'to teach', is the causative form of

[42] STAAL 1986, 255.
[43] STAAL 1986, 256.
[44] STAAL 1986, 264.
[45] STAAL 1986, 282.
[46] Staal continued the point: "The only important exception was Max Müller – an exception not easily brushed aside for he was one of the greatest pioneers of precisely these studies that are at the heart of the Indian oral tradition" (STAAL 1986, 282). For a thorough review of the Indian regard for orality, see GRAHAM 1987, chapter six.
[47] COLLINS 1992, 121.
[48] GRAHAM 1987, 69.
[49] GOMBRICH 1990, 24–26.
[50] COLLINS 1992, 121.

the verb*vac*, 'to speak', *vāceti* means to teach by making the pupil recite after the teacher.[51] A 14th century commentary, the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, in one chapter rehearses the advantages of writing books, and, in a second much longer chapter, describes the advantages of listening to the preaching of the *Dhamma*: "Listen all you good people who are present here in order to hear (*sunāthasādhavosabbesotukāmāidhālayā*)".[52] In the Buddhist system, verbal recitation makes the text familiar, and familiarity is prerequisite for the mental recitation needed to attain full understanding and *nibbana*.[53]

Mary Carruthers elucidated the role *memoria* played in the ancient and medieval western curriculum. The curriculum, predicated on incorporating texts into memory, left writing in a secondary role, a prosthesis, in Carruthers' words (1990, 11):

> A work is not truly read until it is made part of oneself" [...] for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one's brain by emotion and sense.

Memory as a process was likened to reading written characters (2008, 24), but the symbolic forms impressed into the "seal in wax" Carruthers adds, "serve a cognitive purpose, as do the representations of words, whether by phoneme or syllable or unit of sense, used in writing systems. [...] the 'representation' in memory is 'verbal' rather than 'pictorial' in nature" (2008, 25).[54]

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[51] COLLINS 1992, 122.
[52] COLLINS 1992, 126.
[53] COLLINS 1992, 127.
[54] Compare Shirley Brice Heath's cites classical and medieval rhetoricians and grammarians who observed that "literate knowledge depended ultimately on oral reformulations of that knowledge" (HEATH 1986). For a thorough review of the regard for speech, books and literacy in the ancient western tradition see GRAHAM 1987, chapter three.

Rejecting the Aristotelian postulate that written signs are second grade signs, signs of signs, visible signs of pre-existing signs, the late Roy Harris anticipated that when a history of writing *as writing* is written: "speech will be seen as the historical crutch on which writing was obliged to lean in its earliest phases, a prop to be thrown aside when no longer needed".[55] Whether the future bears this out remains to be seen.[56]

M.A.K. Halliday concluded that writing "was not primarily a new way of doing old things with language [...] but came into being precisely so that new registers could be created: so that there could be written language that was not the same as the spoken".[57] From this I take it that he refers to the principal uses of writing for accounting and administrative purposes, not to new forms of myth, epic, lyric, story, proverb, riddle, joke or religious discourse, expressions of the human imagination attested to since antiquity. It is the case that tokens of those genres were, eventually, put into writing, but long before the advent of writing they were given voice, heard, comprehended, and their meanings remembered via spoken language by human agents. *Homo loquens* antedates the appearance of *homo scribens* by millenia. As John Miles Foley's conceit has it, if a history of mankind is superimposed on an annual calendar,

[55] HARRIS 1986, 158. In preface to a claim for the "semiological independence of speech and writing" (HARRIS 2009, 56), Roy Harris essayed an overview of the genesis of the "Occidental Myth" that recounts the primacy of speech over writing tracing the thread through Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Pythagoreans, Priscian, Augustine, Luther, Saussure, Bloomfield, and Malinowski.

[56] Harris acknowledged "certain forms of speech and certain forms of writing can, in certain circumstances, be made to function as the basis for mutually complementary activities" (HARRIS 2009, 46). The concession to what Harris termed 'glottic writing': "a major subdivision of writing as a whole" (HARRIS 2009, 57), in which speech and writing are in "a temporal correlation [...] [allowing] an auditory sequence of items to match a spatial pattern of items" (HARRIS 2009, 57). In other words, glottic writing correlates writing with speech.

[57] HALLIDAY 1989, 44–45.

the advent of writing occurs only in the month of December[58] or, in Eric Havelock's judgment: "Language […] is the foundation of human culture […] [and languages] have existed as oral systems from prehistoric times".[59]

The dependency of writing on spoken language is, according to John Searle, "a contingent fact about the history of human language, and not a logical truth about the nature of language." Referring to logical and mathematical languages, Searle observed that their spoken versions *go the other way*, being "simply an orally communicable way of representing the primary written forms".[60] So, if logical and mathematical symbols "go the other way," written forms of spoken language are 'simply a visual way of representing the primary spoken forms'.

Additional evidence relating written to spoken language is reported by neuroscientific studies of reading acquisition that pinpoint a child's phonological awareness – i.e., the ability to recognize syllable, rhyme, and phoneme – as the key determinant in learning to read and write: "Awareness of the phonological structure of one's spoken language is clearly fundamental to the acquisition of literacy".[61] Learning one's letters depends upon recognizing fundamental phonological units of speech.

William A. Graham considered reading to be an oral process: "reading a text means converting to sound, aloud, subvocally, or in the imagination […] and the original and basic orality of reading is the key to the fundamentally oral function of written texts".[62] Whether this same relationship holds for the

[58] FOLEY 1998, 2.

[59] HAVELOCK 1982, 45. Writing creates a world of things, *energeion*, a synoptic vision, while speech creates a world of happening, *energeia*, a dynamic vision (HALLIDAY 1989, 93 and 97).

[60] SEARLE 1977, 207.

[61] GOSWAMI 2009, 138. Goswami noted the same prerequisite holds for deaf-mute children, as well (p. 141).

[62] GRAHAM 1987, 33.

composing and comprehension of narratives is the crux of the matter I am grappling with, and attempting to understand. In weaving a narrative, does an author hear a mentally perceptible voice or voices in dialogue? Does a mentally perceptible voice arise in the imagination of a reader interpreting a composition via the written page? My claim is that such is exactly the case: Voice, what Roland Barthes called "the privileged [eidictic] site of difference",[63] sounding mentally or aloud, animates a text. Voice enchants and conducts the auditor/reader into the realm of the narrative fiction.[64] Bakhtin's concept of the chronotrope is useful here as it involves a complex field of signs in which voices construct time and space.[65]

The anthropologist or folklorist studies people, with their voices, and their voices in performance. The medievalist operates in a paradoxical situation, attempting to interpret voices that are unavailable, except as residue in written texts, and is further challenged to imagine the contours of a performance to which the text is but an imperfect witness. The reproduction of a work of art, Walter Benjamin wrote: "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be".[66]

For a medievalist, interpretation requires reimagining the historical parameters that conform a text. And the choice of the proper terms of analysis for reimagining, reconstructing, and reinterpreting a preterite verbal expression of bound

[63] BARTHES 1985, 279.

[64] Western metaphysical and linguistic thought attributes "presence, authenticity, agency, rationality, will, and self" to voice as well as being "separable from and subordinate to its referential content or message" (WEIDMAN 2015, 233).

[65] Ms. Chiara LoVerde informs me the ancient Greek verb 'to enchant' is associated with the effects a *sophist* elicited in his auditor (personal conversation).

[66] BENJAMIN 2001, 1167–1186; 1168. Reflecting on what, exactly, an ethnographer does, Clifford Geertz posed Paul Ricoeur's question, "What does writing fix?" (GEERTZ 1973, 19): "Not the event of speaking, but the "said" of speaking, […] the *noemic* ["thought," "content," "gist,"] of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event."

concepts–time and space, desire and precept, thought and voice, tradition and innovation, intention and result, perception and reality–is restricted by the one's vantage point in the present. What links the medievalist's *hic et nunc* reading to a historical audiences' experience of a text is the modality of voice, though the signal is imperfect and dilute.

Zumthor insisted, correctly, on the fundamental role voice played in medieval literature, as well as the challenge it poses today, to recognize that "the incomparable properties of the human voice"[67] offer a point of leverage, a purchase on interpretation: "what can be said about medieval writing begins with and arrives at what can be said about medieval oral activity".[68] Zumthor held that a poetic form meant for oral delivery "cannot be identical"[69] with one intended for reading. Yet there is a *tertia comparationis*: voice. Paul Kiparsky illuminated the point neatly: "Surely the ethos of an author does not depend on his use of ink, but on his relationship with the society in which he lives and the audience for which he writes".[70]

Let me reiterate my view on the oral/literate question: To the best of my knowledge, in the whole of human history there is no report of a mother giving birth to an infant bearing pen and paper in hand. It is the case, rather, that healthy infants everywhere are born innately equipped to acquire the phonology, lexicon, and syntax of all human languages, to comprehend them *aurally* and manipulate them *verbally*. This obvious and natural difference points toward the linguistically orthodox position that speech and hearing are primary features of language, while writing systems are a second order phenomenon, *pace* Derrida.

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[67] ZUMTHOR 1984, 73.

[68] ZUMTHOR 1984, 73. The scholastic tradition designated three phenomena with one word, *vox*: the sound uttered, the linguistic sign, and the meaning it conveyed (ZUMTHOR 1984, 75–76).

[69] ZUMTHOR 1984, 89.

[70] KIPARSKY 1973, 184.

I am not suggesting that writing systems lack significance or symbolic value, they possess both. As the anthropologist A.L. Becker recognized in the course of learning Burmese, "writing systems (and other systems of representation) are among the deepest metaphors in a language".[71] Yet the Eurocentric and Romantic view that writing creates a new kind of mentality simply encodes the 19th century European elites' cultural chauvinism, the misapprehension that they themselves embodied the pinnacle of human intelligence and culture; what Eric Havelock called "a curious kind of cultural arrogance which presumes to identify human intelligence with literacy":[72] Let me restate my question: do writing and literacy restructure narrative?

Conclusion

If I place the score of a Beethoven sonata on the music stand of a piano, and seat myself well away from the piano, no one would suggest that I am present at a performance of the sonata. The score is mute. The sheets of paper neither mark a tempo, establish a rhythm, nor make audible even a single musical tone. The signs indicating rhythm, melody, harmony, modulations, and so on, are mute. The composer conceived

[71] BECKER 1993, 63.

[72] HAVELOCK 1982, 44. Roy Harris dismissed that pretense as a false dichotomy obscuring a realistic understanding of the effects of writing on thought. By his account all new technologies restructure thought: the advent of the abacus had a greater effect on thought than the invention of writing, and the advent of the camera even more than the abacus. In Harris' view, writing facilitates "autoglottic inquiry," opening a "conceptual gap between sentence and utterance," the locus of "autoglottic space." This space "makes 'logic' and 'dialectic' possible" (HARRIS 1989, 104) and presupposes the validity of 'unsponsored speech', words detached from a human sponsor, decontextualized words (p. 104), speech divorced from the immediacy and presence of face-to-face interlocutors. The authority to speak, and responsibility to tradition for the accuracy and validity of the utterances pronounced, are displaced by writing and made available for evaluation independently of the speaker's intentions (p. 105). A view that insists on the reality of mental differences in cognition, separating the literate from the illiterate.

and heard their ensemble mentally, before and after years of partial deafness then complete deafness sealed him off from the realm of physical sound. Just as a musical score is brought to life by the intervention of a voice, human or instrumental, which belongs to an interpreter who comprehends the signs' intentions, so too, written words are mute until a reader transcodes them into phonological symbols that summon their sense. The motive force that transforms the silent written symbols is desire, the desire for communication, and satisfying that desire requires knowledge of, and ability to operate within the symbolic system in play. Written signs index phonic signs and, according to context and genre, communicate sense and sensibility, whenever the interlocutors desire to communicate. To the case I have tried to present, that narrative strategies are imagined and verbal and prior to any recording medium, writing, audio recording, etc. – simply because language is primarily verbal rather than visual – a caveat must be added, writing allows for editing, but, so too, recall the Somali oral poets' mental editing processes. The primordial mode for communicating a narrative, a poem, a proverb, a riddle, a joke, or a prayer, is the same as that of language in general phonology: oral and aural. In the words of John Miles Foley, oral traditions are like language, only more so. Which is a different way of saying that narratives, traditional or otherwise, are verbal and their strategies are mental; oral traditions of all kinds are a hyponymy of language:[73]

> Oral transmission over large stretches of time and space comprises first of all language, which is at the same time our most complex system that is being transmitted, and the medium through which many other traditions are orally transmitted – including folklore, jokes, laws, myths, and epic.

[73] STAAL 1986, 251.

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